





AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

by  
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TO  
H. T.

"The stern old war-gods shook their heads".  
EMERSON





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# AMERICAN LITERATURE



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE FIRST FRONTIER AND PURITANISM: 1607-1750

THAT same destiny which in America halted the fabulous Mayan civilization decreed that the literature of this country of dark forests and wide plains should be, in its beginnings, a transplanted literature. Its flowering, as we know it to-day, does not reach back directly to such native epics as *Beowulf* or *The Song of Roland*; its roots are not in the folk-ways of its continent's savage people, but in the speech and writing of western Europe. Moreover, its hardiest, most seminal slips from old-world gardens came not from Spain, which imposed a civilization upon Mexico; not from France, whose handful of settlers in the North found no highly developed Indian culture; but from England, which contemptuously subdued the aborigines and reasserted its own intellectual life. English speech, English writing, English cultural ideals were, save for cross currents, to dominate for centuries the literature of North America. Such a transfer to new realms of the ancient, powerful English culture was not unusual; it was the latent might of America, creating in three centuries one of the strongest nations of the earth, which made this replanting significant, which in due time made American currents of thought, and thus American literature, unique.

For if it be said that few important elements in the American culture are underived from England, it is equally true that not one of these escaped the modifying or magnifying stimuli of America's growth and conflict. Puritanism, a grim counsellor in seventeenth-century England, became in America a giant setting its foot on later generations. Romanticism, to cite another example, restrained in England by a deeper culture, found across the sea expressions at once virile and grotesque, as in Walt Whitman. So with philosophy and political thought; these also took on strange guises in the America which Emerson called both intelligent and sensual. Not only were these familiar attitudes altered under the new sky, but original currents, unknown in "our old home", bore us along, as in our passion for the frontier, to convictions concerning literature peculiarly our own. We study, then, not, as in some literatures of Europe, the logical evolution of a pattern through hundreds of years, but our assimilation within three centuries of many modes of thought, some drawn from the parent stock, others from the consequences of setting down a few Englishmen in the seventeenth century on a narrow strip of land between the wilderness and the sea.

These pioneers and explorers, landing in Virginia in 1607, aiming more frankly than the colonists of Massachusetts, thirteen years later, to better their worldly condition, pro-

duced, even as they fought the Indian and founded farms, a body of writing compounded of bare narratives of the frontier and of echoes of European culture. In John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624) or in Ebenezer Cook's *The Sot-Weed Factor, or a Voyage into Maryland* (1708) live again the seventeenth-century explorers and business men, viewing the new scenes through the old eyes of British commerce. Yet on the banks of the James River George Sandys completed his capable verse translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1626), observing serenely that it was

limned by that imperfect light which was snatched from the hours of night and repose, having wars and tumults to bring it to light instead of the muses.

The literature of seventeenth-century Virginia was, indeed, though this distinction has been overemphasised, less influenced, in this clime of southern skies and an Anglican church, by the freezing winters in what Cotton Mather called "Christ's unredeemed kingdom"; less illumined by Calvin's flaming hell, so real to the New England divines. That peculiar New England fusion of the harsh frontier and the doctrine of man's depravity was less operant upon these Virginia writers. They, too, suffered from the Indian, these few gentlemen, such as George Percy, and the more numerous "unruly gallants, packed thither by their friends to escape ill destinies",



but in each mishap they perceived less solemnly than their kinsmen in the North "God's wonder working providences"; and they wrote of "the fruitful sisters", Virginia and Maryland, freely, even gaily. Thus, as the frontier withdrew its immediate menace, we see in the South not the angry expulsion of Thomas Morton, damned by his "Maypole of Merrymount", not the town meeting, not the Puritan family circle, listening to Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom* (1662), but fox-hunting, the courthouse, the narrow tobacco wharf, and merry, scholarly William Byrd, stealing out from Westover to read to a lady a new play from London, *The Beggar's Opera*.

This contrast with Massachusetts is perilous, but the individualism to which Virginia has always been friendly was mirrored in Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* (1729, 1841), with its humor, its gusto, its lore of plant and animal, and its interest in Adamic man. Likewise, the later historians of the South seem to write more normally, without fearful glances toward the invisible landscape, concerning the terrain about them. Sir Robert Beverley, planter and slave-owner, in his *History of Virginia* (1705) describes the country accurately, poetically, and almost as a scientist. Hugh Jones, William Stith, and also John Lawson, who paddled a canoe down the rivers of North Carolina, confirm the impression that upon these writers of the South the frontier exerted its influence more simply

than on the preoccupied, introspective overlords of the Plymouth and Massachusetts colonies. Both types of man, the pioneer without Puritanism and the pioneer in whom it was an ardent principle, were, as the years passed, to drive back the frontier; and both types, moulded by its mighty influence, were to affect the course of American literature.

Yet the liberalism of Virginia rendered its early literature a flaccid product compared with the tough writings of the New Englanders who grappled with theology, history, government, and even rough-hewn poetry. This Puritan literature remains, as Carlyle said of Mirabeau's writings, strong meat, no food for babes. For the Puritans came to America with a code, with principles for which they were quite ready to die, if necessary; these a frontier could not alter; instead its terrors intensified convictions concerning God's absolute sovereignty and man's vileness. The Puritans came, nourishing their essential principle, nonconformity, but establishing new authorities as autocratic as those which they had abjured; the Bible and direct communion with God became their inflexible canons. This self-discipline in the life of the spirit they strove to infuse into their government, a theocracy in which church and state were one. It is an amazing spectacle, their weaving of this bristling frontier into their own fixed cosmos, and yielding to its influence only as a confirmation of their own re-

ligious beliefs. Out of this point of view arose the character of the early American Puritan, in market place plain of dress, in pulpit plain of speech, shooting his arrows, he said, into the hearts of men; from these principles followed his solemnity, his reticence, his capacity for work. He was at once citizen, theologian, economist, and pioneer: "Clearer of Wildernesses", "Founder of Towns" were the epithets by which these men—not, said Bradford, "easily discouraged"—distinguished each other.

And out of these principles, too, so misinterpreted to-day, sprang the Puritan literature, craggy, unadorned, learned, naïve, and occasionally impassioned, as in the writings of Peter Folger, Nantucket pamphleteer and grandfather of Benjamin Franklin, or later in the prose of Edwards, with his pictures of the sulphurous Last Judgment. During the first fifty years, these pioneers, cut off from the cultural founts of Europe, struggling in hut and cornfield for a living, drifted downward in the scale of culture, almost, in some instances, to Indianization. Yet—for the group included learned men—by 1700 they could point to a body of writing in manuscript or print—sermons, tracts, histories, journals, and poems. Such early work may be divided roughly into a literature of fact and, though the two types intermingle, a literature of religion. For simple, straightforward chronicles were inevitable. Not only

were the Puritans imitating the historians and diarists of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, but they reported as practical men what they saw about them. They were frontiersmen, and until it ended about 1890 the frontier was to beget such unadorned records; in its story the trapper's curt sentences have always preceded the poet's and novelist's romantic tales. Of all these severe narratives the finest are, perhaps, the histories, so stark yet so moving in their implications of heroism. William Bradford, first governor of Plymouth Colony, wrote, with Edward Winslow, a journal of the first thirteen months; appearing in London in 1622, it became known as *Mourt's Relation*. Its story of "The First Encounter" should be carefully reread by the modern pilgrim before he stands on the hill near Eastham, surveying the lonely Cape Cod sands and waters, hardly changed from that day when they met the anxious gaze of Bradford's party. Yet Bradford's most memorable book was his *History of Plimouth Plantation*, describing the colony from 1620 to 1647 and recounting with dignity the events in the life of his people, whether these concerned the death of Elder Brewster, who was, says Bradford, of a singular good gift in prayer, both public and private, in ripping up the heart and conscience before God,

or the slaughter of the Pequots, of whom he set down:

It was a fearfull sight to see them thus frying in the fyer, and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stinck & sente ther of: but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice.

Yet probably more important is John Winthrop's *History of New England*, in the form of a diary, whose first entry was made off Cowes in 1630 and whose last was recorded in the year 1649. Winthrop, the first governor, though matter-of-fact like Bradford, illumines the Puritans' conception of the frontier, as well as other idiosyncrasies in their thought. Thus, observing a combat between a mouse and a snake, in which the former conquered, he noted

that the snake was the devil; the mouse was a poor contemptible people, which God had brought hither, which should overcome Satan here and dispossess him of his Kingdom.

Winthrop, indeed, never tired of relating such "special providences"; his anecdotes of the colonies' customs made his book a treasure-trove for American men of letters and historians. Not only does he marvel at the famous mass hallucination of the phantom ship in New Haven harbor and the use of bullets as farthings, but he depicts the drunkard Robert Cole, wearing his red "D" about his throat. Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Whittier are in debt to John Winthrop's dry record, as are all lovers of New England to his correspondence with Margaret, his wife. This is a memorial of a gracious Puritan love story.

These downright histories of men engaged in building a commonwealth were supplemented by less conservative accounts of the new experience, such as Thomas Morton's *New England Canaan* (1637), a witty denunciation of Puritan schemes in America; Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour in New England* (1654), a militant description of New England as the last battle ground of Antichrist; Judge Samuel Sewall's *Diary* (published many years later, 1878-1882), a trenchant chronicle of a Puritan's daily life, Pepysian in detail concerning public events, courtships, witchcraft, and haircuts; or, as we approach the next age, Sarah Kemble Knight's racy narrative of her journey from Boston to New York (1825). All these are interesting recitals, enlivened by Puritan crotchets concerning religion and government. Yet to-day we linger over the laconic tributes to that enemy of Christ's kingdom—the merciless Indian. One by one his strongholds fell. "So that", wrote Captain John Mason in his blunt, pious *A Brief History of the Pequot War* (1677): the mischief they intended to us, came upon their own pate. They were taken in their own snare, and we through mercy escaped. And thus in a little more than one hour's space was their impregnable fort with themselves utterly destroyed, to the number of six or seven hundred, as some of themselves confessed.

Different from John Eliot and Daniel

Gookin, missionaries to the Indians, Mason, William Hubbard (*Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians*, 1677), John Williams (*The Redeemed Captive*, 1707), Thomas Church (*Entertaining Passages Relating to King Philip's War*, 1716), and Mary Rowlandson (*Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration*, 1682) tell patiently the story of the anguish of this first and most terrible American frontier. "Now", wrote Mary Rowlandson,

is the dreadful hour come that I have often heard of . . . but now mine eyes see it. Some in our house were fighting for their lives, others wallowing in blood, the house on fire over our heads, and the bloody heathen ready to knock us on the head if we stirred out. Now might we hear mothers and children crying out for themselves and one another, Lord, what shall we do!

Yet dearer to the New England Puritan than such conquests of the frontier or the building of his state was his love of the City of God. Even over his literature of fact shone his dream of the Being who guided him in the wilderness. Naturally, then, his most enduring writing concerned not the frontier, not the familiar food of literature, nature and human experience, but this apocalypse, vouchsafed him, he thought, by his principles of conduct, by his intuitions of the soul's communion with God, by his theology, by his mysterious, immutable book, the Bible. When he left the plough, the musket, or the town meeting, and in his study grasped the

pen, God was the theme which engaged his mind. Insulated from the more liberal consequences of the Renaissance and Reformation, he drew his intellectual life from a by-product of these powerful trends—Puritanism. Uncivilized by the political, social, and educational gospels which tempered Milton and other English Puritans, he found his sources for writing in his heart, in John Calvin, and in Holy Writ. Daily his eyes beheld, not the quiet Linconshire village, but the primitive street, and at its end the palisade, ominous symbol of what his dogma told him of the terrors of God. If he wrote, apart from bleak histories, of his community, this writing would be of Him. Thus in sermon, tract, pamphlet, and even in verse, His chastisements, His mercies would be hymned. "And now," wrote Michael Wigglesworth, "through thy rich grace and daily assistance I have done composing".

Thus, much of this literature of religion is undiluted theology, as in the writing of John Cotton, Thomas Shepard, and Thomas Hooker, all of whom were Cambridge men. Angry, abusive Nathaniel Ward, in *The Simple Cobler of Aggawamm* (1647), deplores the growth of tolerance, and even the more liberal Roger Williams is violent in controversy, speaking of the Rhode Island snow as "the white legions of the Most High". At the beginning of the eighteenth century this barren concept of literature reached an



apogee in the erudition of the Mathers. Increase Mather was minister of the North Church of Boston, President of Harvard College, and author of *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684), and his son, Cotton Mather, still towers over the age, an incredible epitome of the labor and learning of this generation of New England Puritans. His admonition, "Be brief", over the door of his study, in which his normal day was said to be seventeen hours; his anguished introspections, lying on the floor of this study, concerning his wife, himself, and the subtlest forms of God's "providences"; his some four hundred books; his busyness in the witchcraft scandals—all imply, perhaps, a hardening of original Puritan principles, as hostility toward them increased in an ever more democratic community. Yet Cotton Mather's eccentricities cannot dim his intellectual achievements.

The greatest of these was his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), whose seven sections dealt with the ecclesiastical history of New England from 1620 to 1698. Innumerable scholars and antiquarians, and browsers, such as Hawthorne and Whittier, have broken through the brambles and thorns of this old book, to taste its tart fruits of learning and adventure. For in its tangle of italics and quotations, reminding us of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, we find so good a tale as that of Sir William Phips and Quebec.

Here are conceits, anecdotes, and iron sentences, sending us back to Thomas Fuller, beloved by Mather, and to the rich, epigrammatic prose of seventeenth-century England. Mather's ornate style was, however, dedicated to "the wonders of the christian religion, flying from the depravations of Europe to the American strand", to "the notables of the only Protestant University, that ever shone in that hemisphere of the New World", to "a rich variety of synodical and ecclesiastical determinations", to the "amazing judgments and mercies, befalling many particular persons among the people of New England". By the year of Cotton Mather's death (1728) Cadwallader Colden, in New York, had printed the first part of his *History of the Five Indian Nations* (1727), and an urbane young man named Benjamin Franklin had already published a *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* (1725) and in the *Philadelphia Mercury* had commenced his *Busybody Papers*. Yet in his determination to sustain New England in Puritan godliness, this frail, intellectual preacher and writer, Cotton Mather, never faltered. "Lord," he would pray, meeting in the street a tall fellow, "give that man high attainments in Christianity!"

Yet Mather was interested not only in science and politics, but, as the *Magnalia* suggests, in literature. In recommending candidates for the ministry he discussed music,

and he favored both the reading and writing of poetry. His *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693) hints that in the eighteenth and even in the seventeenth century the Puritans tested their literature of religion not solely by theology, but by certain canons of art. A study of Puritan prefaces, sermons, and diaries indicates distinct concepts for writing. Such criteria they possessed; the graceful turn of a white steeple, a panelled fireplace, a seventeenth-century silver tankard mock the myth that these old Puritans had lost by the way their sense of beauty. Indeed, the opening image of Michael Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom* intimates that their esthetic code, however inarticulate, included poetry:

Still was the night, serene and bright  
When all men sleeping lay.

. . .

Shall we not, then, find in this garland of early American poetry one or two unfaded flowers? No, the poetry, too, belongs to the literature of religion. For these middle-class divines, lacking both the genius and the culture of their contemporary Milton, wrote always with the heavy conviction that all stirrings of beauty in the human spirit must be consecrated to religious emotion and even to dogma—to election, grace, and to infant damnation, the subject of Wigglesworth's most famous lines. Their poetic aims inspire respect, bearing comparison with those of Dante, Milton, or Newman, and sometimes

their passion for the unseen world lifted their doggerel into the mystic's mood of supernal beauty. Alas! too seldom! Theological argument and scriptural quotation lie like a dull fog upon even the poetry of "sweet Ann Bradstreet".

This Englishwoman, daughter of Governor Thomas Dudley and wife to Governor Simon Bradstreet, was our first poet, though earlier attempts to build a rhyme may be found in the writings of William Wood (*New England's Prospect*, 1634), Peter Bulkeley, and in the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640). Mistress Bradstreet, acquainted with Francis Quarles' *Emblems*, with Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, with Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas, and with Spenser, wrote in *The Four Monarchies* and other didactic poems sterile rhymes on sterile subjects, hardly justifying her grandiose title, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650). Nor does even the peaceful *Contemplations* explain to us why Cotton Mather thought this poetry "would outlast the stateliest marble", or why Mistress Bradstreet's friends "weltered in delight" or were "sunk in a sea of bliss". The modern reader turns rather to her simple, sincere verses on her husband or to the song of her "eight birds hatched in one nest". For the most part, she is too conscious, despite her superior culture, of the doctrine ever-present in this New England literature—to know God and enjoy Him forever. This was

the chief end of man, and, also, apparently, of poetry.

Other verse, such as Urian Oakes' *Elegie Upon the Death of the Reverend Thomas Shepard* (1677) or Benjamin Tompson's harsh satire, *New England's Crisis* (1675), or William Morrell's *Nova Anglia* (1625) are peaked compared with the "blazing, sulphurous poem", already mentioned, Michael Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom*. Perhaps no single work of literature represents more justly the temper of the seventeenth-century American Puritan mind. For *The Day of Doom* was the best seller of its time, a copy being vended for every thirty-five persons then in the colony, a sales percentage secure from the rivalry of even Edgar Guest. Its popularity was due not only to its jiggling rhyme and melodrama agreeable to the meager culture of its readers, but also to its emphasis upon the Bible, for which in his margins Wigglesworth cited chapter and verse. It dwelt also upon Calvinistic dogma, and upon the pyrotechnics of the Last Judgment, at which

. . . by and by the flaming sky  
Shall drop like molten lead.

Wigglesworth has not progressed far beyond his introductory, poetic lines when he is involved in a technical theological discussion on the more or less plausible excuses of the damned. Yet, most of all, *The Day of Doom*

shows, in the intensity of the gentle minister of Malden, "a man of the beatitudes", how the Puritan's emotion was turned white-hot into this single channel, making all that he wrote essentially a literature of religion.

This concentration upon the unseen world produced one of the most commanding philosophical intellects of all time. In Jonathan Edwards, theologian, preacher, and writer, were all the virtues and many of the faults of Puritanism comprehended. Student and tutor at Yale College, minister for twenty-three years at Northampton, missionary to the Indians near Stockbridge, President of Princeton College, trader in sheep; such events in Edwards' external life convey little of the tragic drama of his mind. He was in youth a precocious student of science and philosophy, writing of spiders, of cosmic ether, and of the natural laws of the fixed stars. Exact in thought, precise in language, he showed in both his preaching and his writing his relentless pursuit of ideas, in defiance of his age's imperfect science and bigoted theology. Had he but lived in another epoch, in another land than Puritan New England, his logic might have led him far into the philosophic light of free minds. Even in the shadow of Calvinism his thinking, we now know, took him on a perilous way, toward conclusions which he never dared proclaim. As it was, in eighteenth-century New England, he perceived, distressed, the faith of his Congregational

church hard pressed by liberalisms in political and religious thought. Yet the only hope of the churches, he believed, was Calvinism. So to the orthodox faith he gave his mighty intellect, championing doctrines which one side of his nature intuitively rejected and supporting, almost single-handed, declining Puritanism. His *Freedom of the Will* (1754), denying that man can escape such laws as election and grace, was an effort to reconcile the irreconcilable, the metaphysical idea of a transcendental universe, of which he was conscious as a mystic, with the fiats of John Calvin.

This work did not appear, however, until four years prior to his death. From day to day the full force of his thought appeared in his sermons, whose titles hardly suggest the exactitude of his mathematical mind in action—"Wicked men useful in their Destruction Only", "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners", "The Torments of the Wicked in Hell, no Occasion of Grief to the Saints in Heaven". From individual records concerning his delivery of these closely knit, well-reasoned treatises we understand why his auditors cried out, "Mr. Edwards, forbear!" Speaking quietly and with the assurance of a geometrician demonstrating a proposition of absolute certainty, he stirred to anguish, as in his famous Enfield sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", audiences which found in the unsullied sweetness of his face

a mute contradiction to his terrible testimonies of an avenging deity:

That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. *There* is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of . . . The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some lothsom insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire . . . you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours . . . O Sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in. 'Tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. . . .

Edwards' intensity of feeling and language, however, was nourished less by darkness than by light. During his stay at Yale he built in the woods a booth where he might retire for prayer and where he had visions of the sweet excellency of Christ. He described these ex-



periences in diction pure and elevated, different indeed from the hard phrases of his theological discourses. This mood is in him, too, as he writes of Sarah Pierpont, "the young lady in New Haven", later his wife, who

will sometime go about from place to place, singing sweetly . . . and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.

In brief, in the thirty-six works of Edwards and in his life appear most of the Puritan characteristics discussed in this chapter, including even the minor trait of thrift, shown in his recently published letters concerning the sale of wool. More than any other American figure before 1800 he represents, also, the subordination of literary and artistic qualities, so evident in his *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746) and in his *Diary and Resolutions*, to religion. Even in the pitiful waste of his great talents as missionary to the Indians we perceive a characteristic New England attitude toward the frontier, in contrast to that of Virginia. The frontier was to have its day, but this chapter has shown, I hope, that during this first century and a half the shaping force in American literature was that strange composite of trader, warrior, and divine, the New England Puritan.

CHAPTER TWO  
DEISM, CONTROVERSY, AND THE  
BEGINNINGS OF *BELLES LETTRES*:  
1750-1800

THOUGH doomed by the death of Edwards, the literature of religion yielded to the new forces reluctantly. It was to influence even nineteenth-century poets, such as Bryant and Longfellow, and to infuse a pious tone into a considerable body of writing prior to the Civil War. Now, in the eighteenth century, though modified by the time spirits of democracy, deism, controversy, patriotism, and by an ever-deepening culture, it was powerful. It expressed itself not in Calvinistic sermons but in the writings of the Quakers and of other apostates from strict New England Puritanism. John Woolman, relying on inward light, believing not in the depravity of man but in his goodness and in his universal brotherhood, dwells persistently upon man's intimacy with God. Thinking, he said, of Indian warfare,

the desire to cherish the spirit of love and peace,  
arose very fresh in me.

This tailor, whose prose was beloved by Charles Lamb and Whittier, travelled to Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, and Nantucket to bring his gospel to Indians, negroes, and

sailors. He recorded in his *Journal* (1774) his belief that

acting contrary to present outward interests, from a motive of divine love, and in regard to truth and righteousness . . . opens the way to a treasure better than silver, and to a friendship exceeding the friendship of men.

Meanwhile axes levelled the forests; cities rose; ships conquered river and ocean; orators spoke out boldly in house of burgesses or in legislature; the colonies were becoming a nation. In the very year of Woolman's death (1772) Timothy Dwight published *America, a Poem*, and Philip Freneau issued *The Rising Glory of America*; and that incarnation of secular America, Benjamin Franklin, had already penned five chapters of his *Autobiography*. Franklin wrote of science, and the Bartrams of botany, while Jefferson studied, in unconscious preparation for the Declaration of Independence, the rights of mankind. In England Lord Chatham mused over the "decency, firmness, and wisdom" of the American state papers. The buoyant, practical world of the years preceding the Revolution is alive, in the pictures of rural America, in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur.

Indeed, to many Americans "Christ's unredeemed kingdom" seemed nebulous in comparison with the potential wealth of the colonies. Crèvecoeur's remarks on religion center in "Liberty of Worship". This young

Frenchman, arriving in America about 1760, serving with Montcalm in the last French and Indian war, lived near Albany, in Pennsylvania, and in Orange County, New York. Perceiving the Revolution to be essentially a class struggle, Crèvecoeur chose the loyalist side, and set down concerning the patriots observations which are wholesome reading for sentimental descendants of these heroes. In his early, unacted play, "Landscapes", he depicts the patriot Deacon reading his Bible while his wife rifles the loyalist house. The Deaconess remarks ironically that she would be happy to see the loyalist's wife, this traitress to the republic, at home, "with all her little Tory bastards about her". Crèvecoeur, as his recently discovered *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* (1925) re-emphasizes, was at heart a romantic, an amateur naturalist, and, though ill at ease in his adopted language, endowed with literary talent. In "What is an American?" he reflects the feelings of the eighteenth-century settler impartially, but his emotion overcomes him as he encounters hardships on the frontier. Listen to him as he describes the scene after a battle when the bereaved search for their dead:

I can easily imagine or conceive the feelings of a soldier burying the bodies of his companions, but neither my imagination nor my heart permit me to think of the peculiar anguish and keen feelings which must have seized that of a father, that of a mother avidly seeking among the crowd of slain

for a disfigured corpse of a beloved son, the throbbing anguish of a wife—I cannot proceed.

Behind the increasing body of writing dealing with man in this actual America, that is, concerning the American in contact with nature, politics, and society, lay the dynamic thought of eighteenth-century philosophy. The true enemies of the literature of religion were Newton, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, and, in this country, Franklin, Jefferson, and Thomas Paine. God revealed himself, the Age of Reason declared, despite the anachronistic Edwards, not in theology, not in the Bible, but in the visible scroll of nature. In this document man could read his destiny. They preached, these philosophers, "the natural man", whose ethical need was to study the laws of this book; of the tormenting problem of evil, the fiber of the Puritan cosmos, they deftly disposed as a transient phenomenon. Did not all nature, all history proclaim their doctrines, progress and the perfectibility of man? All this was part of "the Enlightenment", which obtained its hold in America through its pertinence to the growing, changing American society, in which the sociological corollaries of this philosophy could be observed in action.

Concretely, in our religious life, this philosophy took the form of various degrees of deism. Conservative deists, such as Franklin, adopted the cooler aspects of Christianity; but the radicals, such as Thomas Paine, spat

upon the supernatural doctrines of the Church. For all deists God was the absentee landlord of this house of the universe. This He had built; men might study its architecture in His remorseless laws for nature and society. Deism must be viewed in perspective, both in its effect upon the personal convictions of eighteenth-century Americans and in its complex relations with the political and social gospels of the age; both Franklin and Jefferson, who declared himself a follower of the ethics of Jesus, were religious men. Nor can the political documents, such as those of Hamilton and others, be ascribed entirely to deism. Nevertheless, deism explains much concerning American literature of the latter eighteenth century. The principles and the names of French and English philosophers do not appear conspicuously on every page of its writing any more than the specific laws of Darwinian science intrude into Victorian poetry; but deism was a way of thought setting the tone not only of Franklin's *Autobiography* and of Paine's *Common Sense* but of innumerable forgotten books of the era.

Franklin, clear-headed and even-tempered, seems, indeed, a mirror of this phase of American thought. Reading Locke, Collins, and Shaftesbury and also the arguments against the deists, he had no doubts about the soundness of the former. From that day when he sold his Bible until just before his death, when he assured Ezra Stiles that presently he in-

tended to test in person the doctrine of immortality, he remained convinced that a Being ruled the world, but also that He was inscrutable. "Powerful Goodness," he called Him, but refused to dogmatize further. From this serene if not very imaginative view of the universe flowed Franklin's urbane, successful career, and his equable writings. These take full account of sensible men like himself but little of that world of the spirit typified by Dante or Shakespeare, whom, I believe, he never mentions. Edwards' metaphysical girders, reaching toward heaven, he thought extremely shaky. Carlyle's phrase, "the Father of Yankees" does justice to one side of "Pappy Franklin", but not to the larger aspects of the man; despite his coonskin cap, he was at home in the best philosophical and scientific thought of his age.

This career of Franklin's, a forerunner of so many like it in Philistine America, hardly wearies even now, after a hundred retellings. The fifteenth child of a candle-maker, he was apprenticed at the age of twelve to his brother James, a printer. Living on a vegetable diet that he might buy books, he mastered his trade and also all those small virtues to which he later attributed his success. Arrived in Philadelphia, he persuaded Governor Keith to send him to London, where he remained for eighteen months, reading, writing, and making helpful friends. On his return to America prosperity marked him for her

own: he became colonial assemblyman, post-master-general, agent in London of the colonial assembly; dominant political leader in the years before the Revolution; intercessor for the aid of France, and finally, member of the Constitutional Convention. By the year of his death (1790) he had been intimate with kings, statesmen, philosophers, and scientists; had played a commanding part in the events of his time; had made the word "useful", by his dozens of inventions, synonymous with his name; and had become the idol of his people. Surveying the variety and sweep of his life, we think less, after all, that to him the sun resembled a sizable guinea, but rather of him arm in arm with Voltaire or crowned by Mirabeau in the Elysian fields amid flashes of beneficent lightning.

In brief, Franklin's life and achievements seem to illustrate his philosophy of "victorious common sense" and to justify his literal religion, which made him barbarize the Lord's Prayer. He would perhaps be amused to be respected as a man of letters, for this, in the truest sense, he was not; he thanked God that he had escaped the wretched fate of being a poet. Yet his capable hands could ply the pen. The maxims of *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1733-1758) are still current, and throughout Franklin's miscellaneous works passages arrest the mind through their clear, dignified eighteenth-century English. The *Autobiography*, with its romantic and providential



history, begun in 1771, laid aside in 1788, bringing the story of his life down to 1757, will remain a monument to Franklin's strength and weakness. With its blind spots for the ineffable mystery of life, it has, nevertheless, the strong man's love of its struggles, its prizes, and its everyday joys. The *Autobiography* has the frankness of the great confessions; and, unlike some of these, it is uniformly cheerful; Franklin was perfectly adjusted to life. It must have been a source of some annoyance to his more intense friends, anxious, as they often told him, concerning his immortal soul, to observe his serenity in his matter-of-fact creed; to hear his chuckle as he remarked that the various opposing sects would probably have to forego at the Last Judgment each others' damnation and be content with their own salvation.

Daily happiness Franklin believed to consist in little things; he was quite ready to repeat the delightful experience of living again in this world. "Were it", he remarked at the opening of the *Autobiography*,

offered to my choice, I should have no objection to a repetition of the same life from its beginning, only asking the advantages authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first. So I might, besides correcting faults, change some sinister accidents and events of it for others more favourable. But though this were denied, I should still accept the offer.

Though Sainte-Beuve and others have cited instances of finer perceptions in Franklin, such is essentially the mood of his life. His subtler feelings were, indeed, due to no real variation from his philosophy but to his supplementary rôle as an amused observer of mankind. Ironical, as in his passage on the Hessians, which interests so many younger students of Franklin, playfully wise, as in *The Whistle*, he appears in his light essays or bagatelles as a genial satirist, mellowed by his years of association with humanity and enriched by Continental influences. This Franklin writes gaily in French to Madame Helvetius; he composes the "Model of a Letter of Recommendation"; or he addresses in dialogue his enemy Madame Gout. Smiling at them from the window of his sedan chair, he seemed to his contemporaries a benign proof of the perfectibility of man.

Franklin had met in London the young Thetford Quaker Tom Paine. Taken with "those wonderful eyes of his", the elder deist urged Paine to come to America. Thus began the violent course of the "pioneer free-thinker", the "morning star of the Revolution", "the great Commoner of Mankind", or, if you prefer the other side, Carlyle's "rebellious stay-maker", and Theodore Roosevelt's "filthy little atheist". For a long time aristocrats were to wear in their boots nails forming the hateful monogram "T.P.". Beginning as editor of the *Pennsylvania Maga-*

zine, Paine plunged into religion and politics, serving during the war as Secretary of the Committee of Congress on Foreign Affairs and as emissary to France. Or he stirred restless patriots by his soul-animating sentences, as in his familiar exhortation:

These are the times that try men's souls! The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

One Revolution could not content this fire-brand. Again abroad, he became a member of the French National Convention, and, when imprisoned for a year, he criticised Washington for attempting to secure his release. Meanwhile he poured out the books which have made his name an emblem for blasphemies against God and man.

Paine's last and most famous book, begun in prison, *The Rights of Man* (1791-1792), summed up the motivating philosophy of his life. This reply to Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* popularized deistic doctrines, scoffed at mystery, and insisted on the natural privileges of each individual. It suited exactly the taste of a postwar generation whose deism inclined toward a philosophy of materialism. "The book called the Book of Matthew", declared Paine, in passages on Christianity which horrified every American divine,

says that *the Holy Ghost descended in the shape of a dove*. It might as well have said a goose; the creatures are equally harmless, and the one is as much a nonsensical lie as the other.

Developing his social ideas, expressed earlier in *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Crisis* (1776), Paine reiterated that

every age and generation must be free to act for itself *in all cases* as the ages and generations which preceded it.

The laws affecting humanity were, he believed, operant in society, and nowhere more forcibly than in this society of America. We must, then, prevent insolent kings from ruling our country if their mandates violate the natural man's prerogatives. Paine was one of the first to advocate frankly economic independence from England. As a whole his writings are brilliant, sometimes shallow, propaganda. Yet there was sincerity in his bold declaration: "The world is my country, to do good my religion".

In quiet libraries a few cultivated persons took down from their shelves the essays of Addison, the poetry of Pope and Goldsmith, or the novels of Richardson. Yet in 1776 America was hardly ready for *belles lettres*. The fierce tumult of founding a nation had created a reading public voracious for printed expressions of the philosophical, political, and social ideas behind the struggle. Such readers were usually unequipped for more than *Poor*

*Richard's Almanac* or *Common Sense*. At this period in the history of our literature, even scholars, such as John Trumbull, turned to temporal mediums of writing. So, after the rattle of the Lexington musketry, the literature of religion, of science, of philosophy embraced even more Philistine forms—the oration, the pamphlet, the formal state paper, patriotic ballad, and satire. This strident literature of controversy, persuasive, argumentative, vituperative, noisier than Tory and patriot cannon, did battle throughout the remainder of the century, involving a hundred issues, Calvinism, deism, atheism, Federalism, Jacobinism, Bunker Hill, and “the Battle of the Kegs”. In such a bedlam the voice of poetry, faintly audible, fell silent; Philip Freneau turned savage satirist, and Timothy Dwight described in heroic couplets the burning of Ridgefield.

James Otis, that “flame of fire”, and Samuel Adams, whose every word “stung like a horned snake”, assailed the Tories; Jonathan Odell denounced the rebels as “rats, who nestle in the lion’s den”. John Adams, John Randolph, and Patrick Henry swelled the angry chorus. Yet in contrast to patriot and loyalist ballads men heard the calm words of Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence* and the cool logic of Hamilton in *The Federalist* (1787-1788); and out of the turmoil was born our first literary circle, the “Connecticut Wits”. The title is ambitious; if these were “wits”, what were the other citi-

zens of Connecticut? Large sections of the Wits' writing was religious and political. In Trumbull's mock-heroic satire, *M'Fingal*, modelled upon Butler's *Hudibras*, patriot buffets Tory,

. . . lifting high the pondrous jar,  
Poured o'er his head the smoaking tar.

. . .  
And clouds him o'er with feathers missive,  
And down, upon the tar, adhesive.

Trumbull's poem, which passed through numerous editions, suggests the controversial character, chiefly in behalf of conservative thought, of the "Pleiades of Connecticut".

Yet this group, which met at the "Bunch of Grapes" in Hartford, loved literature. Lemuel Hopkins was the author of clever satire; Theodore Dwight and Richard Alsop wrote lyric poetry; and Elihu Hubbard Smith compiled the first anthology of American verse. Trumbull was a true intellectual, and if David Humphreys and Joel Barlow sold their grandiose writing to jingoism, they were, nevertheless, in the intervals of their full-blooded lives, honest henchmen of a new, aspiring literature. David Humphreys, "be-loved of Washington", survives to-day, a not-quite-comic example, so substantial were his achievements, of the tie-wig, patriotic school. In uniform beside his general, wearing his elegant sword for service at Yorktown, bringing merino sheep from Portugal to Derby,

Connecticut, to aid American industry, planning his heroic couplets as calmly as he directed his troops in battle, he seems the apotheosis of the orthodox in post-Revolutionary American life. At Yale he had been the champion of "respectability and the rights of Freshmen"; in his old age, with ruffled shirt and equable mien, he ground out his correct poetry, that is, as correct as his insensitive literary talents permitted. His muse admitted no discrimination in subject and abundant license in rhyme. Without a smile he composed *A Poem Addressed to the Armies of the United States of America* (1780), *A Poem on the Happiness of America: Addressed to the Citizens of the United States* (1780), and *The Glory of America; or, Peace Triumphant Over War* (1783). Solemnly he invoked:

Thee, Agriculture! source of every joy.

Barlow was a more flexible spirit, but he carried on in *The Vision of Columbus* (1787; revised as *The Columbiad* 1807) the majestic diapason of the republic's greatness. The bad boy of the Hartford Wits, in 1787 he escaped their iron code of the traditional by journeying to France, where he remained for eighteen years. His poetic gift suffered no sea-change, but he became Jacobinical, even writing a song in honor of the guillotine. Later, through his European connections, he amassed a fortune in the Scioto Land Company in Ohio. The massive grandeur of *The Colum-*

*biad*, dedicated to Robert Fulton, and of "Kalorama", his estate near Washington, is misleading. Barlow was a stately personality, hungry, like his Connecticut friends, for pomp, but beneath his formal brow was a human spirit and some real wit. One day in a Savoyard inn he encountered a dish of Indian meal, and wrote his satire, *The Hasty-Pudding* (1796). Pope's *Rape of the Lock* has perhaps no better American children than such passages as the following:

There is a choice in spoons . . .  
A bowl less concave, but still more dilate,  
Becomes the pudding best . . .  
Fear not to slaver; 'tis no deadly sin:—  
Like the free Frenchman, from your joyous chin  
Suspend the ready napkin; or, like me,  
Poise with one hand your bowl upon your knee;  
Just in the zenith your wise head preject,  
Your full spoon, rising in a line direct,  
Bold as a bucket, heed no drops that fall,  
The wide-mouthed bowl will surely catch them all!

Barlow's is, indeed, a heavy lightness, but other moods were in him than those of the gargantuan *Columbiad*, whose dramatization Hawthorne suggested, to be accompanied by artillery and thunder and lightning.

Trumbull's friend the Reverend Timothy Dwight, for twenty-two years President of Yale, and a defender of Calvinism against materialism, may well outlive the other Wits. Like them, he was a nationalist, zealous of making the literature of America as grand as her destiny, hoping, he said, to throw in "his



mite, for the advancement of the refined arts, on this side of the Atlantic." His *Conquest of Canaan* (1785), an epic in eleven books, touts both scriptural and revolutionary heroes, and *Greenfield Hill* (1794), imitative of Goldsmith and Thomson, defines the cultural models of the Hartford circle. Dwight, apart from his poetry, appears to enjoy a posthumous vitality denied Trumbull, Humphreys, or Barlow. So mighty was he, thundering at every young skeptic, so sincere in his religion, as evinced in his version of the one hundred and thirty-seventh psalm, so conversant with the life of his epoch, that he remains basic for students of eighteenth-century America. His *Travels in New England and New York; 1796-1815* (1821-1822) is worth a dozen *Columbiads* or Humphreys' doggerel on American husbandry.

The Connecticut Wits proclaim our gradual drift, since the days of Wigglesworth, from literature as a mere record toward *belles lettres*. When these youngsters, steeped in Pope or Goldsmith and eager for a national literature, planned their *Anarchiad* (1786-1787) or *Echo* (1791-1805), satirical newspapers, writing in America was still in bondage to the concepts of religion, philosophy, or patriotism. But the Wits were cultivated; they had a *flair* for a well-knit paragraph or stanza. They were, at any rate, closer to Parnassus than were Edwards or Crèvecoeur or Paine. Moreover, in the most humble writ-

ings of the eighteenth century we may now detect that impulse which man, even in his complete immersion in the struggles of life never quite avoids—the impulse to create the beautiful. Much might be said of an esthetic mood in either Edwards or Crèvecoeur. We pause rather over Philip Freneau, lover of nature and poet, driven to scribble of prison ships and political feuds. He symbolizes the eventual flight of literature from church, forum, and battlefield. "What pen can write", he set down of Cornwallis,

What pen can write, what human tongue can tell  
The endless murders of this man of hell!

But his mood is different in "The Wild Honeysuckle" or in "The Indian Burying Ground":

By midnight moons, o'er moistening dews;  
In habit for the chase arrayed,  
The hunter still the deer pursues,  
The hunter and the deer, a shade!

Finally, as part of the emancipation, there are evident, as we approach the nineteenth century, other harbingers of culture. In the eastern cities a new reading public had appeared, less curious about Tom Paine than about Robert Burns, whose lyrics were now reprinted in American newspapers. The literary life of one middle-class New York family is typical. William, Peter, and John Irving, elder brothers of our distinguished essayist, who was still a boy, were active in

"Calliopean" and "Belles Lettres" societies. Far more than New York, which recovered less rapidly from the war, Philadelphia became the center for clubs, magazines, and libraries. Shiploads of books arrived from England, and Americans dared the long voyage to marvel at Europe. In 1804 Tom Moore, though shocked by what he called the "barbaric natives", admitted that he was at the theater nearly every evening. Seventeenth-century Puritans, preoccupied by religion and the frontier, had almost broken the strand with cultural Europe. After the Revolution this strand was reknit; in drama, in poetry, and in fiction Americans emulated once more the criteria of Europe.

It is true that these beginnings were rather pitiful. Joseph Dennie ("Oliver Oldschool") shovelled into *The Portfolio* (1801-) essays, letters from abroad, dramatic criticism, and excerpts from English poetry, notably *The Lyrical Ballads*. William Clifton, another Philadelphian, wrote not merely coarse satire (*The Group*) but mild, graceful lyrics (*Poems*, 1800); and the Bostonian Robert Treat Paine became, in *The Ruling Passion* (1797), a bad imitator, so Washington Irving said, of Dryden and Gray. Over this poetry still lay the blights of convention and political satire. A more popular form of this new, thin culture was the drama. Patriotic plays had flourished during the Revolution, to wit, H. H. Brackenridge's *The Battle of*

*Bunker's-Hill* (1776), Mercy Warren's *The Adulateur* (1773), and Peter Markoe's *The Patriot Chief* (1784). In 1767 in Philadelphia was acted Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*, the first play written by an American and acted on the American professional stage. Washington Irving's juvenile satire *The Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.* (1802) jeers at the melodrama and the apple-throwing, bawling audiences of the Park Street Theater. The stage was now contemptuous of Puritan disapproval and it rivalled in popularity the literature of politics. As a boy of twelve Irving slipped secretly out of his room to attend the old John Street Theater, and John Anderson's manuscript diary of life in New York is a confidential guide to current plays. Our amusement at this amateurish drama subsides after a study of the earnest, idealistic artist, playwright, and stage-manager William Dunlap. Besides contributing his own plays (*The Father*, acted 1789; *Leicester*, 1794, *André*, 1798) and introducing the German drama through his translations of Kotzebue, Dunlap established, it may almost be said, the standards of the early American theater.

Americans were now attending the theater, reading poetry, and discussing newspaper criticisms of the drama. Naturally, then, fiction, banned by the Puritans, peered out of the thicket; it was to attain prominence in the mid-nineteenth century in two great

novels, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*. Royal Tyler, a capable dramatist, wrote in 1795 of the "surprising alteration in public taste":

In our inland towns of consequence, social libraries had been instituted, composed of books, designed to amuse rather than to instruct; and country book-sellers, fostering the new born taste of the people, had filled the whole land with modern Travels, and Novels almost as incredible.

What a change from the day when—such is the legend—Jonathan Edwards forbade his young people to read Richardson! "Let them be", said Parson Weems, biographer and bookseller, as he ordered his stock,

of the gay and sprightly kind, Novels, decent plays, elegant Histories, &c. Let the Moral & Religious be as highly dulcified as possible.

Between 1787 and 1798 were published some twenty-eight American novels or novelettes. The new demigod was Laurence Sterne.\*

This English novelist, as well as Fielding and Smollett, influenced Henry Hugh Brackenridge, but this American's vigorous *Modern Chivalry: or, the Adventures of Captain Farrago and Teague O'Ryan, His Servant* (1792-1806), a bold satire on democracy, is less typical of the period than such lachrymose fiction as *The Power of Sympathy* (1789),

\* For this information concerning the early American novel, I am indebted to Dr. Eugene D. Finch, of Yale University.

Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1790), or Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797). Even the most obscure novels rejoice in Sterne's love of tears, and celebrate, as in *Ferdinand and Elisabeth* (1798),

Blest sensibility! Exquisite meliorator of the mind!  
Touched by the magic of thy wand, the heart  
finds grief delicious.

Stirred by this mood, but also by more complex forces, Charles Brockden Brown emerges as our first authentic novelist. His six works of fiction, all published between 1798 and 1801 (*Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Arthur Mervyn*, *Edgar Huntley*, *Clara Howard*, *Jane Talbot*), were studied by Hawthorne and admired by Shelley.

Brown demonstrates conclusively the triumph of *belles lettres*. Living in Philadelphia and mingling in the society of New York, he, too, like the Connecticut Wits, had aspirations for his country's literature. These he expressed in his magazine, in his quest for young writers of talent—he sought out the youthful Washington Irving—in his use of the frontier and of the Indian in his novels, in his interest in science—one of his characters dies by the odd fate of spontaneous combustion—and in his adherence to English traditions. On the whole, British standards dominated his literary point of view; he imitated Hannah More, Godwin, and the Gothic romancers, besides English novelists of sensi-

bility. Brown was guilty of stilted dialogue, tortuous plots, and such grotesques of horror as that in *Wieland*, in which the maniac, gulled by a ventriloquist, hears the voice of God bidding him murder wife and children. The victims cry for mercy, but no more ardently than Brown's readers; it is unlikely that our age can ever take him seriously as a novelist. Yet in his foreshadowings of Poe and Hawthorne, in his intensity of feeling, and, most of all, in his belief in the novel as a form of art, he pointed the way to the new era. Steadfastly he refused to be corrupted by the current conception of literature as a record of religion, philosophy, or politics. Later novelists were to regard him with respect; his feverish hunt, during his brief life of thirty-nine years, for principles in the writing of fiction accomplished more for our culture than the muddle of heroic couplets and patriotism by which we remember his predecessors. In the beginnings of American *belles lettres* Brown remains a conspicuous landmark.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### ROMANTICISM, DEMOCRACY, TRANSCENDENTALISM: 1800-1865

WHEN, in 1815, Washington Irving sailed for his second sojourn in Europe, he had already written three satires upon the foibles of the little seaport town of New York (*The Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.* 1802; *Salmagundi*, 1807-1808; *A History of New York*, 1809). He and James K. Paulding had become instruments of an easy-going culture, adorned by a group of writers, witty and frankly reminiscent of European fashions in both prose and poetry. These "Knickerbockers", devotees of drama, music, conversation, and light literature, were romantic in temper; that is, they had absorbed the more superficial traits of romanticism; their deities were Byron, Scott, Campbell, Rogers, and Tom Moore. Supercilious toward religious New England and the rural South, they typified, as in the Irving family, the hope of middle-class Americans in New York and Philadelphia of writing, so they said, like gentlemen. "The Life of Thomas Campbell", read Irving's title-page in 1810, "By a Gentleman of New-York." Of books, travel, and British approval they were covetous; toward American problems, American themes, and the concept of an indigenous American literature they were casual. To write with elegance and ease of an urban society, of an idealized



nature, of a legendary past, ah! this was the goal for genteel spirits of the republic; leave thought to solemn Bostonians!

Though absent in Europe for nearly one third of his life, of this Knickerbocker group Irving remained the leader. Rereading his languid essays, it is difficult to understand his immense contemporary fame—a question puzzling Poe, who threatened a brutal analysis of Irving's actual worth. Yet Irving's hold upon his own generation is indisputable. For forty years, beginning with *The Sketch Book* (1819), he was, in spite of the doubts of bolder intellects, such as Poe's and Emerson's, a benevolent dictator of American literature. His *Sketch Book* was the product not only of his artistic nature but of his love of old England, of his worship of Walter Scott, and, more directly, of necessity. The youngest and most brilliant of five brothers, forced, at the age of thirty-six, by the failure of the family business in Liverpool to write for a livelihood, almost overnight he became, as the painter Leslie said, "the most famous fellow in London". He had won Englishmen, among them Byron, Coleridge and Scott, by a delineation of a mythical past, and he had simultaneously conquered America by gilding the Hudson and the Catskills with romantic traditions whose existence we had never suspected. "The Mutability of Literature", "Westminster Abbey", "Stratford-on-Avon", "The Boar's Head Tavern, East-

cheap" made Irving in England the intimate of Gifford, Rogers, Campbell, and Jeffrey, while "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" established him in his own country as her "first man of letters". "Crayon", wrote Byron, "is very good". Meanwhile Longfellow and Hawthorne, students at Bowdoin College, pored over the fair, clear type of *The Sketch Book*.

For the next decade Irving, in contrast to his youth in provincial New York, lived in Europe, travelling, writing, and at times tormented by the venom of jingoistic Americans, who accused him—such was the penalty of his devotion to Europe—of voluntary expatriation. In six different countries he filled a score of notebooks and thousands of quarto sheets with observations, descriptions, and tales, and if, as one critic said, he merely did *The Sketch Book* over and over again, he became, nevertheless, not only one of the most cultivated Americans of his generation but a stylist. After making his residence in Paris and London, and exhausting his passion for the ways and customs of old England, he crossed the Rhine in 1822 to explore "the rich mine of German literature"; he planned to excel *Bracebridge Hall* (1822) by a "work on Germany". At Dresden, where he spent this winter studying the German romantics, listening to Weber's music, and projecting a volume in the manner of *Wilhelm Meister*, he knew Frederick Augustus I, Tieck, and Böt-

tiger, the antiquary. Yet in Germany Irving failed to achieve his original purpose; he returned to Paris with only manuscript fragments, which he later published in *Tales of a Traveller* (1824)—a book savagely attacked by English reviewers.

In this year Irving turned dramatist, collaborating with John Howard Payne, now the author of *Clari* (1823), containing its famous song, "Home! Sweet Home!". Three years later began the most colorful experience of Irving's life; from 1826 to 1829 he drank deep of the history of old Spain. In Puerto de Santa Maria he associated with the distinguished German scholar Böhl von Faber and in Seville with his daughter "Fernán Caballero", later the Spanish novelist, the perfecter of the "artículo de costumbres", a form of essay akin to his own. Later, in Granada, he lived, surrounded by Spanish peasants, in the Alhambra, the "palace of delights". Of these experiences were born three books (*A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, 1828; *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada*, 1829; and *The Alhambra*, 1832), persuasive illustrations, in their popularity, of American enthusiasm during the first half of the century for European romantic themes. After his return to America in 1832 Irving, unmoved by the new currents in literature of democracy (Cooper) or of transcendentalism (Emerson), adapted his romantic approach to the frontier. Using authentic records of exploration, he composed

his sentimental books on the West (*A Tour on the Prairies*, 1835; *Astoria*, 1836; *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.*, 1837), and after an elegant interim as Minister to Spain (1842-1846) dwindled away in flaccid essay and in conventional biographies of Goldsmith, Mahomet, and George Washington. As he lived on at Sunnyside until his death in 1859, he seemed to epitomize the shallow romanticism of American literature during the period preceding the Civil War.

The answers to Poe's misgivings concerning Irving's contemporary fame are now at hand; his popularity was the result of his adroit use of a well-known form, the essay or sketch, his style ("sweetness of composition", Jeffrey called it), and the fusion of his writing and his personality. Lovers of his urbane essays, meeting him at Holland House or at the court of Isabella II, were satisfied; like his books he was modest, humorous, cultivated. Indifferent to the depths of romanticism—he disliked Wordsworth and Coleridge—he sailed smoothly along on its surface traits, so dear to the alphabetical culture of Americans; like them, he loved the legendary past, the picturesque, the sentimental. He substituted, so he described a process of his mind, feeling for thought. His weakness was that of his epoch; he imitated Europe, and he was unmindful, as his idealization of the frontier shows, of the forces which were to create a

Whitman or a Clemens. Yet this absorption in the traditions of English literature is his strength. On a summer day the lazy crows, cawing "Rip Van Winkle", wing their way across the blue Hudson; amid the fragrant orange-blossoms and fountains of the Court of Lindaraxa, King Boabdil reappears; or the village maiden sits before her thatched Warwickshire cottage. Reposefully, Irving throws over us the spell of the past until we understand the comment of Thomas Campbell, that here, at last, was an American who could write classic English. The reviewers expressed amazement at this savage from the pampas of America with a feather in his hand instead of upon his head.

By writing in London in 1832 an introduction to a volume of poems by William Cullen Bryant, Irving linked himself to native poets who echoed English romanticism. Bryant, though endowed with other traits peculiarly American, was influenced by Wordsworth, who is said to have committed *Thanatopsis* (1817) to memory. Bryant's orthodox criteria for poetry were balanced by a life of eighty-four years imbedded in American ways of thought. As a farmer's boy in Cummington, Massachusetts, as a student at Williams College, only a few years older than himself, as a lawyer in Pittsfield, he was imbued not only with Puritan attitudes but with a love of the Berkshire country—its hills, streams, and flowers. Yet from 1825 un-

til his death in 1878 he was identified with New York City. The Massachusetts poet turned publicist, orator, and editor of the *Post* and became the champion of Lincoln and of abolition. In his youth, in his poem *The Embargo*, he satirized Jefferson; in his old age, he beheld the migrations beyond the Mississippi and watched the rise of Whitman, Clemens, and Harte; no American man of letters' life story includes more changing phases of American thought than Bryant's. His activity in public life reduced his output to some thirteen thousand lines, and these are concerned almost wholly with his deeper, youthful passions, born in New England, for nature and for poetry:

I said, the poet's idle lore  
Shall waste my prime of years no more,

. . .

Still came and lingered on my sight  
Of flowers and streams the bloom and light,  
And glory of the stars and sun;—  
And these and poetry are one.  
They, ere the world had held me long,  
Recalled me to the love of song.

Yet, partly because nature recalled Bryant to poetry only in the breathing spells of a busy life; partly because he was sensitive to but a few poetic experiences, his verse, as a whole, enjoyed no real development. Indeed, *Thanatopsis*, begun at the age of seventeen, is perhaps his most remarkable poem. It contains, at any rate, the major elements of his power as a poet. Here are his dignified han-

dling of blank verse, his clarity, and his characteristic elevation of tone. Here is his didacticism and here are the twin themes of nature and death which he delighted to interfuse. And over the entire precocious poem rests, like the first light fall of snow upon his Berkshire hills, the faint chill so typical of this singer of autumn and winter.

Indeed, Bryant warns us that he cannot regard poetry as "the pastime of a drowsy summer day". Even "The Planting of the Apple Tree" and "Robert of Lincoln", poems of a more genial cast, have their "mossy stem" and waning summer; and many other lyrics repeat the solemn story of man's mortality. "The Fringed Gentian", "The Yellow Violet", or "To a Waterfowl", which Hartley Coleridge called "the best short poem in the English language", end in ethical tags. This verse justifies the assertion that Bryant was the first poet to dwell lovingly on the natural beauty of our own woodlands and fields, but it seems, after all, less typical of him than the "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood", the "Hymn to Death", or "A Forest Hymn". Flux—this was Bryant's dearest theme. Citizen of the world he was, but the Calvinistic rigor of his New England ancestors and his boyhood in Massachusetts had done their work. Compared with the volatile romanticism of Irving, Bryant's is a strange compound: in him meet the Puritan's sense of an inexorable law and the Wordsworthian's love of nature.

While, partly under Irving's influence, "jaunty Nat Willis" (*Pencillings By the Way*, 1835, *Inklings of Adventure*, 1836), Fitz-Greene Halleck (*Fanny*, 1819), Charles Fenno Hoffman, and other Knickerbockers offered travel books, poetry, and Western tales in our tepid romantic tradition, a bolder spirit, James Fenimore Cooper, was now articulating the crude, naïve republic. Cooper despised Irving, believing him denationalized and sycophantic. His own literary career derived not from old-world culture, of which he was inclined to be contemptuous, but from storm-tossed America—its politics, its democratic dreams, and its frontier. Though in family and in temperament an aristocrat, Cooper wrote sympathetically of these interests of the common man in pamphlets, communications to newspapers, in a *History of the Navy of the United States* (1839), and in more than thirty works of fiction. Some of these novels are rubbish; some are social documents, now studied as precious records of the thought of Cooper's time; a few are masterpieces of thrilling narrative of the frontier; and five depict a great character of world fiction, "Leatherstocking".

Living as a boy on the shores of Otsego Lake, when parts of New York State were still frontier, Cooper formed his lasting impressions of the wild forest and the pioneer's clearing. After two years in Yale College, and service in the navy, he married Susan De



Lancey, of Westchester County, and settled down at Cooperstown, where he began his tempestuous career as a novelist. "Why", he exclaimed, in the well-known anecdote, "I could write you a better book myself", and threw aside a sentimental novel of the day. After the briefest apprenticeship, he published *The Spy* (1821), a story of the Revolution whose hero, Harvey Birch, intrepid adventurer, is still beloved by romance-hungry readers. Two years later he had finished *The Pilot*, and in 1828 *The Red Rover*, tales of the sea containing Tom Coffin, another "Leatherstocking", said Lowell, "rigged up in duck pants and a sou'wester hat". Yet the former year is chiefly significant for initiating in *The Pioneers* (1823), reminiscent of Cooper's youth, the series in which his hero "Leatherstocking" attains his full proportions as the native American, the frontiersman ennobled by his association with nature. These books, which so enthralled, among other Europeans, Goethe and Balzac, appeared at intervals during the next eighteen years and made Cooper, in spite of his vagaries as a citizen and critic of American society, our greatest novelist prior to the emergence of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841) Cooper captured two moods of the frontier which had affected American feeling since the day of John Smith and William Bradford, its romance and also its reality. .

Cooper, however, was, until his death in 1851, less occupied with his superb talent for narration than with living his violent life as a critic of the American republic. In Europe from 1826 to 1833, he remained, unlike Irving abroad, aggressively patriotic. Yet on his return, he attacked in, to cite only one example, *A Letter to His Countrymen* (1834) American subservience to European influences and American pusillanimity in deserting democratic principles. Recent studies have proved the justice of his strictures, but, as he denounced contemptuously in letter and preface the flaws in American society, flaying with enthusiasm nearly every class and nearly every type of individual, he seemed to the average citizen a terrible Thersites. Hence the press vilified him, and the public lost sight of the valor of his single-handed, victorious combat in libel suit after libel suit, in their anger at his temerity. Cooper the novelist was confused with Cooper the critic; reviewers would not praise his magnificent stories of the frontier because they writhed under the castigations of his satire (*Home as Found*, 1838). No brighter illumination of our "mercantile culture" can be found in the first half of the nineteenth century than its stupid blurring of Cooper's fame as a novelist. Criteria for morality, for patriotism, and for art were in the 'thirties and 'forties hopelessly intermingled. What were the public's touchstones for our men of letters? Not genius, which Cooper possessed, but their

religious and political creeds! Irving, though more shocked than Cooper at America's crudeness, buried his distaste in private letters, and in his books on American themes shrewdly avoided controversial issues. The glory of Cooper, as it now appears, is that he spoke his mind fearlessly and let men think as they would of himself, of his opinions, or of his novels. He has his reward to-day in our new understanding of the strength and intelligence of his mind.

Nevertheless, Cooper's indifference to the art of fiction crippled his influence upon American letters. At best, he is still known as an uncouth prodigy. He was not deeply read; his sense of form was imperfect; he would not take pains to delineate character or to write natural dialogues; his novels are replete with laughable instances of repetition, extravagant incident, and even bad syntax. Mark Twain's essay "James Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" contains a kernel of truth; the humorist's amusement at what he called "Cooper Indians" has been shared by historians. Cooper was primarily a man of action who used the novel as an instrument for expressing his convictions about democracy, and especially democracy in America. As a novelist he had one talent, the power to write sustained, breathless narrative. And out of his interest in democracy and its relation to the frontier, out of this power to tell a story was born the indigenous democrat, "Natty

Bumpo" or "the Deerslayer" or "Hawkeye". We see him as a young woodsman, as a frontiersman in the prime of life, as an old man, answering, as Death comes, "Here!" Living simply with simple men, fearful of the complex life of the cities, lover of forest and lake, he represents democracy's hope deferred of a natural man, loving humanity and, through nature, communing with God.

Meanwhile, in the New England which Bryant forsook, which Irving and Cooper ridiculed, had grown up an intellectual life of tougher fiber. Although by the first decade of the nineteenth century many New Englanders rendered only lip service to the Calvinistic creed, heresies made slower headway here than in worldly, social New York. Even after deism and material prosperity made the old beliefs seem more and more incongruous, the descendants of the colonial ministers still gazed fondly on an invisible landscape, hardly less sable than that of the Mathers. In the comfortable conclusion, long since accepted in more genial sections of the country, that man was "an august animal", destined for happiness in this world, the majority of New Englanders now acquiesced, not only because of the influences of democracy and deistic thought but because of the emergence of a liberalism which had been latent in such seventeenth-century divines as John Wise and Roger Williams. Without tracing in detail the progress of this inner emancipation, it

may be said that it reached a culmination in Unitarianism, which sought to reconcile to Christianity the bolder concepts of the nineteenth century and to proclaim the goodness of man. Yet, as said, the old *liaison* with an austere, unseen world persisted; the gaiety of Irving's *Salmagundi*, for instance, was alien to earnest New England. About 1830 the learning and religion of its founders flowered forth in a renaissance of history, poetry, and philosophy. Of the *belles lettres* of this movement something will be said in the next chapter. For the moment we should study the Concord men, stirred by dreams of a reborn, democratic religion; excited not by Byron and Scott but by Carlyle and Wordsworth; stimulated not by manners, customs, and politics but by the ideal of a spiritual man in original relation to this American society and to the universe. Provincial but aspiring, they sat obedient at the feet of all those good and great, as Emerson called them, who had sought an intuitive knowledge of God, directly, through evidence transcending the senses; they listened to Coleridge and Goethe and also to Plato and to the prophets of the Orient.

Though we might pause in this Concord group over the "Orphic Sayings" of the Connecticut pedlar and soothsayer Amos Bronson Alcott (*Tablets*, 1868; *Concord Days*, 1872), over the aggressive, incoherent, rapturous Margaret Fuller (*Woman in the Nine-*

*teenth Century*, 1844; *Papers on Literature and Art*, 1846), over Jones Very, Christopher P. Cranch, John S. Dwight, or others, the greatest of these American transcendentalists were two, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Born of a long line of New England ministers, reared in a household in which contended the best influences of the old religion and of the new intellectual awakening, instructed in Plato by Aunt Mary Moody, Emerson served in youth an apprenticeship in the life of the spirit. On the bridge of Unitarianism, in whose tenets he was ordained, he crossed to his own simple, though philosophically complex, belief in man's immediacy to God through nature. Church and ritual were superfluous. "Let me admonish you . . .," he repeated, "to go alone". Enriching his principle of intuition by its application to ethics and by his own serene life, he became, in the end, a religious leader, almost a seer. He is read by schoolboys and by Oriental thinkers; no American writer has contributed more than Emerson to world thought.

In spite of recent biographies, Emerson's early spiritual history is still obscure. His youthful poem "Grace" and his other juvenilia hint at skepticism at variance with the popular picture of a self-contained, buoyant Emerson. After the death of his young wife, Ellen Tucker, the resignation of his ministry, and a period of ill health, he spent a year in

Europe, where he explored not places but minds. Yet Landor, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and even Carlyle, the men he "wished most to see", dissatisfied him. On the vessel homeward he exclaimed, "Back to myself!" A period of meditation followed, spent chiefly in the fields near Concord. Suddenly, at about the age of thirty-three, he spoke out, three times, in such accents that the conventionalities of religion and "the stern old war-gods" of Cambridge trembled. In *Nature* (1836), a poetic self-communing rhapsody, he defined man as the center of the universe, ministered unto by nature's commodity, beauty, language, and discipline, until "the noble doubt" arose in his mind whether nature itself was not a symbol merely of the ever-present God, of an Idea shot through and through a translucent universe. By means of nature—he included science—fallen man could know God and return to his high estate. Though full of hard, sensible sayings, *Nature* revealed the mystic strain in the young intuitionist. One does not forget him as he muses:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. . . . Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal

Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

Emerson's next challenge to conservative thought was dramatic. In 1837, in a Phi Beta Kappa address to an audience which included Josiah Quincy, Daniel Webster, Thoreau, and Richard Henry Dana, Jr., he adapted his concept of "the primacy of the soul" to the scholar, and, in particular, to the scholar in American life. He gave a memorable definition; the scholar, he said, was "Man Thinking". Three influences moulded the true scholar: Nature, Books, and Action. Finally, he attained his climax: "Patience, patience . . . we will work with our own hands." Respectability was outraged; the young minister had slighted the Bible, had been pantheistic! But in the following year in *An Address to the Senior Class of Divinity College* he added that Christianity "dwells with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus"; fervently he urged his hearers to approach God as pure spirit, without the profanation of theology or any intermediary. Then, though battered on all sides, he fell silent. "I cannot argue", he said.

Beneath the three essays, containing in essence the gospel of Emerson, lay a single philosophical concept: "There is one man". All, the humblest or Jesus himself, are parts of this "delegated intellect". The veil and the symbol of God are nature. Through under-



standing nature Man strives ever to return to Him, and does return, on wings of light. Emerson plays brilliantly with many related, even contradictory concepts, but this of Unity in Diversity dominates his thought. *Nature* was a closet meditation; the *Divinity College Address* was his manly contrast of this new faith with the obsolescent creed of his fathers; but *The American Scholar* was, perhaps, the most pragmatic and timely. It embraced, somewhat indifferently as a minor matter, the long tradition, which had haunted Americans since the Revolution, that we should create an independent body of thought, but it went much farther. It proclaimed, with a philosophical basis from Plato, Plotinus, and other thinkers, that as individuals and as a civilization we should live by a new vision of truth. Simple men, living close to nature in a relatively simple society, we should know God simply. "The sun shines to-day also". God *is*, not was. God *speaketh*, not spake.

Emerson the villager now lived on his small farm in Concord, and farmers noted approvingly his participation in town meetings, his remarriage and children, his Yankee profile. Though always apart, seeing, he said, his family across a gulf, firing a gun with an embarrassed expression on his face, and declining to practice his own teachings at Brook Farm, he became more and more rooted in his native soil. His writings, too (*Essays, First Series*, 1841; *Essays, Second Series*, 1844),

though metaphysical in "The Over-Soul", "Circles", or "Intellect", restated his doctrines of God and nature in terms of man's daily life: "Self-Reliance", "Compensation", "Domestic Life", "Love", or even "Gifts". Now developed, happily co-incident with the intrinsic feelings of American democracy, that curious double appeal of his aphorisms, sharp, tingling sentences, drawn from his "savings bank" (Journals). These were crammed with a wisdom which teased men to challenge, to deny, to accept. For they reached, such sayings as "Hitch your wagon to a star", not merely the thoughtless, buoyant American, who was to "follow the trapper into the prairie", but the thoughtful, who understood Emerson's deeper meaning. We were to link our lives with that unknowable force which suspended the planet aloft in the heavens. Self-reliance might sustain the honest man founding a family and a business, but also the meditative spirit who comprehended that self-reliance in its highest form was God-reliance, that is, following the gleam of light from the unseen.

One may study the further expansion of Emerson's ideas in such essays as "Experience", honest criticism of his own philosophy, or in *Representative Men* (1850) and *English Traits* (1856), his applications of "self-reliance" to biography and to our parent civilization. The latter book resulted from the second of his three journeys to Europe, during

which he found himself "shovelled together again" with Carlyle. Later, sitting in a café in Paris, he even speculated upon a long stay in this city which had so alienated him in 1833. His mind was, indeed, enlarged, but his two volumes of verse (1867, 1878) remind us that he was still at heart "Osman" or "Saadi", as he called himself—the poetic interpreter of religious truth. In his latter years his mind failed him; henceforth he could recall, not inappropriately, ideas but not names. He died in 1882, beloved, famous, and evidently serene in the knowledge that despite sorrow he had been able to

Obey the voice at eve obeyed at prime.

That "unity with himself" which Carlyle had remarked, had carried this New Englander up to vision and also down to myopia. Human suffering and passion Emerson hardly saw; the beauty which man's hands had wrought he called, in contrast to the sublime temple of nature, "a little, chipping, baking, patching, and washing". Evil was privative; true beauty was moral. Moreover, he was entangled, his critics have ever said, in a maze of surface contradictions. This objection is captious; Emerson is merely the intuitionist recording without synthesis the perceptions of each moment. All spiritual experiences are scenes in the play, blossoms from the same root, diversities within the unity of Being. But Emerson's defects in the esthetic and human faculties were serious; they made him

austere, remote; Hawthorne spoke of "the mountain atmosphere of his lofty thought".

For to struggling, sinning humanity, not yet ready for his distilled thought, Emerson has little to say. He speaks to the few who are alive to the philosopher's message: "Reform thyself". To such he still speaks distinctly. We are to go alone; to be silent, that in our hearts we may hear the whisper of God. We are to be aware of the past but awake to the present, with its revelations through nature of science and of the philosophy of science. We are to work and to love, but to be calm, too, never forgetting that these beautiful relations of life are but lovely shadows of a perfect beauty, an Absolute. Finally, we are, I think, though Emerson was too humble-minded to exalt his own achievement, to recall his own fulfillment in his life. "You met him" says a biographer,

on the road, so tall and slender, wrapped in his black cloak, with his peering, questioning glance and that smile, as someone described it, 'slowly, very slowly growing until it lit up his whole countenance with a refulgent beam' . . . . You met him on the road, you saw him coming, you wondered if you would ever survive the onset. Then up your spirits went, soaring aloft, in the light of that quiet glory.

Henry David Thoreau, pencil-maker, Concord surveyor, lover of the ancient classics, quasi-naturalist, and practical transcendental-

ist, listened thoughtfully—and critically—to Emerson; he built his hut at Walden Pond, and also a philosophy which cut deeper into the marrow of actual life than Emerson's. Silent, big-nosed, carrying his umbrella, he trudged the fields in search of arrowheads. Ice-fishing in Walden Pond, he surveyed the bright-colored perch and pickerel, red and green against their white background of snow, or, on a summer night, he drowsed in his boat. "It seemed", he said,

as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes, as it were, with one hook.

He snared, indeed, the thoughts of the mystic, the poet, the philosopher, the humanitarian, the naturalist. Yet his inner unity, in which he bears, after all, his strongest resemblance to Emerson, touched such wisdoms incidentally. At heart Thoreau was a skeptic, in the true sense of the word, that is, doubtful of the forms and of the emotion of religion, doubtful of the canons and the accomplishments of civilization, doubtful even—there is evidence for this—that life as most men lived it was good. But his skepticism was not apathy; it was that described by Emerson in his essay "Montaigne":

I stand here to try the case. I am here to consider, σκέπτειν, to consider how it is.

So Thoreau pledged himself to a tireless search

for the secret of living. "I am", he repeated of certain experiences in his life, "still on their trail". One phase of his experimentation he described in *Walden* (1854):

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

He was not, as is so often said, practicing the teachings of Emerson or turning hermit-naturalist or skulking in misanthropy. He craved truth. As he watched the battle between the ants, he wondered; as he heard the screech of the locomotive, he wondered still more. He was, he said, keeping step to the music of another drummer, and not to the squads right of organized society. His other books (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, 1849; *The Maine Woods*, 1864; *Cape Cod*, 1865) relate other adventures in his quest.

This "cosmic Yankee", Thoreau, was a ruthless critic of the American fetiches described in this chapter. He would not gather the fruits of romanticism, democracy, and transcendentalism; he preferred to analyze the soil in which they grew. The romantic strain in himself was paled by thought; checked by his classical bias, by his interest in science, and by a noticeable coldness of mind. To democracy, in its sweating, bumptious

complacence, he opposed not merely the philosopher's disdain but distrust of its gods. At Walt Whitman he stared, admiring but speculative, and he agonized over the tragedy of John Brown. Emerson's doctrine of the individual counselled restraint of popular government. Thoreau favored, as in *Of Civil Disobedience*, no government at all; his thinking inclined toward anarchy. And transcendentalism, too, he held under fire; its violences perturbed him. He, at least, would remain objective, curious, appetent. Nor does his attitude now appear radical, as in the days of our early mercantile culture. Proleptic, he expressed a mood of our civilization which to-day is vocal indeed.

CHAPTER FOUR  
THE FLOWERING OF *BELLES LETTRES*:  
1800-1865

THAT volume of Emerson's declining years, *The Conduct of Life*, suggests the ideal of the Concord men. To them the "Renaissance of New England" meant a vision of new spiritual life in America. Their passions for learning, for European thought, for social experiments centered in the philosophical and ethical questions which challenged Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. In Cambridge and Boston, however, was a different emphasis. Here were wealth, urban society, and the university. Bancroft and Ticknor returned from Germany influenced less by philosophy than by scholarship. Longfellow, who visited Irving in Spain, brought back from this country and from Italy legends of the romance peoples. Oliver Wendell Holmes, wit and diner-out, laughed at Calvinism and also at his friend Emerson, whose

Self-inspection sucks its little thumb,  
With "Whence am I?" and "Wherefore did I  
come?"

Lowell, sensitive to the devastating claims of science and to every controversy in the republic, concerning temperance or the Civil War, wrote with hard sense of our political foibles or, in the orthodox tradition of verse, of Sir Launfal and the loveliness of June in



New England. Though shut out by his humble birth and Quaker faith from the "Brahmin" caste, as Holmes christened the Cambridge intellectuals, Whittier joined them in writing of slavery and of the farmer's boy; his teachers were William Lloyd Garrison and Robert Burns. Instead of living by Walden Pond or meditating in Concord, these New Englanders developed in varying degrees, clubs, conversation, history, political debate, and poetry until Boston boasted a genuine if provincial culture. To this "hub of the solar system", to quote Holmes once more, men of letters such as William Dean Howells and Sidney Lanier later turned their emulous eyes.

This "Renaissance" will presently engage our attention; in this corner of New England, during the thirty years preceding the Civil War, bellettristic culture had deepened. Meanwhile, we may observe in more or less isolated writers the detachment of the artist. One year after Emerson's first series of essays his neighbor in Concord was Nathaniel Hawthorne, then thirty-eight years old, a contributor to magazines and the author of an unobtrusive volume called *Twice Told Tales* (1837). Born of an ancestry as Puritan, if less godly than Emerson's, he, too, was in quest of the invisible world, a world, unlike that of his philosopher friend, in which the gods did not reign serenely on their thrones. "I cannot," said Emerson, "read his romances". Indeed, the seeds of these pale blos-

soms, as Hawthorne called his stories, lay in an intellectual development more exotic than Emerson's and, in some ways, more civilized. From youth, Hawthorne, without dogmatism concerning man's destiny, had studied intensively the obscure, somber workings of the Puritan mind, not only in the seventeenth century of his ancestors but in contemporary life. Fascinated, he watched the operation of that exacting moral law which Emerson had relegated to a negative footnote—"sin". Guilt, such was Hawthorne's judgment, is a stain upon the human soul. "The thief", Emerson had declared in "Compensation", "steals from himself". No doubt, but from others, too. The sinner tosses the stone in the pool, but from its center eddy out in endless, concentric circles the consequences of his act. So Hawthorne meditated, living in the "Old Manse", skeptical concerning the young disciples by whom Emerson seemed forever surrounded. Hawthorne had tried Brook Farm, and had left it impatiently. Concerning these moral enthusiasms, heritages of Puritanism, it was wiser, he thought, to remain objective, to write impersonally, in beautiful and enduring prose, of their subtle influences upon character.

After graduation with Longfellow in the class of 1825 at Bowdoin College, where he conceived, presumably, his first novel, *Fanshawe* (1828), Hawthorne had lived in Salem, practically alone for twelve years, ex-

perimenting patiently with style and with those themes and characters which reached their full development in his novels. For bread he was driven to hack work, but he was never drawn, like Irving and other pillars of our provincial culture, into compromising, to please his public, his principles of art. Looking back on this period of his life, though he had been lonely and though he had not yet married his devoted other-self, Sophia Peabody, he was inclined to think this a happy time in the "old, accustomed chamber", where had appeared to him "thousands upon thousands of visions", where, said he, "I still kept the dew of my youth and the freshness of my heart". Here in our interlude concerning American *belles lettres* is an episode more significant than any in the lives of Boston Brahmins. Here, at last, is a sensitive spirit who dares to live apart from democracy in order to read Milton, Spenser, and Bunyan, to explore the caverns of his own mind, to meditate without moral fervor on this phenomenon of Puritanism. Here, in brief, was our first artist in literature.

Stalwart, handsome, hard-headed, fond of a glass of wine and an oath, with, it now appears, a gift for local politics, Hawthorne must not be typed as a solitary dreamer taking refuge in his art. Nevertheless, the surface events of his life were subordinate, if we compare his career with, say, Irving's or Bryant's, to the absorbing undercurrent of his artistic

interests. He served in the customhouses of Salem and Boston; he was appointed by his classmate Franklin Pierce to a consulship at Liverpool; he travelled in England and in Italy, and before he died he had tasted of that fame which he had long secretly coveted. His four great novels appeared within a decade (*The Scarlet Letter*, 1850; *The House of the Seven Gables*, 1851; *The Blithedale Romance*, 1852; *The Marble Faun*, 1860). His life experience was, on the whole, more diversified than that of most Americans of his era. Yet, I repeat, fulfillment for Hawthorne depended primarily upon the satisfactions of his art, an art singularly self-sufficient, like his own nature. For in England he remained indifferent to his great English contemporaries, and in Italy, though his mind was enriched by gallery and campagna, he still pursued his favorite specters. To his introspective mind the labyrinth of the Catacombs was less provocative than that of Donatello's soul, shadowed by sin.

The republished *American Notebooks* (1932) shows the narrow intensity of Hawthorne's intellectual passions. In *Twice Told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) appears the guerdon of his period of solitude, but in the four novels his recurrent themes and character types attain impressive stature. In these novels he delineates, for example, full-formed, the scholar-idealist, no longer the shadowy Aylmer of "The Birthmark",

but the frustrated Clifford, or Arthur Dimmesdale, his brilliant mind soiled by his secret sin, preaching, or admonishing Hester on the scaffold:

"Hush, Hester, hush!" said he, with tremulous solemnity. "The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts!"

Or he shows the villains, Judge Pyncheon, Westervelt, or Roger Chillingworth, grown from "the dark and fiend-like" Butler (*Fanshawe*); or the three differing types of heroines, Hilda, Priscilla, or Zenobia, reminiscent, among others, of Ellen Langton (*Fanshawe*), Alice Vane ("Edward Randolph's Portrait"), and Beatrice ("Rappaccini's Daughter"). Yet these characters, born and refashioned from Hawthorne's personal experience and from his slender reading, are less illustrative of the singular quality of his genius than his expansion in these novels of his few themes: isolation, sin (with its scores of ramifications), the tyranny of the past, and the elixir of life. Over such insoluble problems Hawthorne brooded until the end; the fragments (*The Dolliver Romance*, 1876; *Doctor Grimshaw's Secret*, 1883) demonstrate in spite of his increased languor toward his art, that in this questioning, despite his normal everyday existence, lay the springs of his life.

In Hawthorne's contemptuous comment

that "the old Union is smashed", in his use of Puritanism as artistic material, in his refusal to cheapen his wares in the market place, indeed, in his entire life, we may discern his detachment. But in this attitude he was not altogether unique. Timidly, but none the less certainly, reared its head in America man's ancient belief that art is more lifegiving than politics. Those guilty of this immortal heresy, even amid shouts of democracy and humanitarianism, were few and disparate, but they were firm in their negligence concerning issues which had warped artists such as Freneau and Irving. They refused to be moved; they declined to care "Who's in, who's out?" One was Hawthorne, but there were others. Of these, many are forgotten; their hope of writing out of their inner lives survives only in stray, pathetic volumes in collections of Americana. But two rank with Hawthorne and may be considered now before we return to the more genial, worldly culture of the Brahmins. The two are Poe and Melville; they adhere to no group, but they also represent the flowering of imaginative letters. These seem strange and perilous blooms, these Ethan Brands, Ligeias, and Ahabs, esoteric, indeed, for the America of the 'forties and 'fifties, but they have outlived the pleasant, proper flowers of the Cambridge garden, by which Longfellow and Lowell introduced to democracy a decorous culture.

Poe, unlike Hawthorne, failed in adjusting

his everyday life to his American environment. During his forty years on earth he suffered intensely, and, though extravagant in its romantic self-pity, there is some autobiographical truth in his lament:

Know thou the secret of a spirit  
Bow'd from its wild pride into shame.  
O yearning heart! I did inherit  
Thy withering portion with the fame,  
The searing glory which hath shone  
Amid the jewels of my throne,  
Halo of Hell!

Poe was the child of a Marylander, disowned by his family for adopting the stage as a career, and of an English actress. Orphaned at an early age, he was taken into the family of John Allan, a wealthy Richmond merchant, supremely unfitted to understand his ward's poetic temperament. After a stay with the Allans in England from 1815 to 1820, he became for a year a student at the University of Virginia, where were apparent not only his talents in mathematics and poetry, but also the dangerous instability of his character. The immediate result of his dismissal for gambling debts was a conclusive quarrel with his guardian. There followed a period of wandering, during which he served in the United States Army under an assumed name and as a cadet at West Point, from which he was evicted in 1831. The clue to the nature of Poe's genius is probably given, in spite of the popularity of his tales, and the recent em-

phasis upon him as a critic and journalist, in his poetic expressions of his spiritual darkness in *Tamerlane and Other Poems by a Bostonian* (1827); in *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* (1829); and in *Poems* (1831). Once heard, this wild chant from Poe's innermost being is not soon forgotten. It is difficult to doubt that it reflected the essential man.

Irritable, unwell, Poe pursued an erratic career among the periodicals, antagonizing his contemporaries by his macabre themes, but persuading America, in defiance of the sentimental standards of which "Dame Irving" was still the arbiter, of the brilliance of his genius. He was at various times connected with the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, *Graham's Magazine*, the *Evening Mirror*, and the *Broadway Journal*; in such pages appeared his prose tales, which almost instantly won him a European reputation. Yet apart from literary conquests Poe lived a melancholy, feverish life, drifting from magazine to magazine, begging his friends to lift him out of debt, hating and loving with neurotic intensity. His excited emotional life included many love affairs, among them his peculiar marriage in 1835 to his child cousin, Virginia Clemm. In a graveyard he had dreamed as a boy of his first love, Helen Stannard, and a year before his death he thus described his cheerful proposal to the poetess Sarah Helen Whitman:



During our walk in the cemetery I said to you while the bitter, bitter tears sprang to my eyes—"Helen I love now—now for the first time and only time."

Poe was no libertine; he was a weak man, insatiable in his need of feminine sympathy.

Poe's other irregularities have likewise been exaggerated. He sometimes drank heavily, but his tremulous nerves were quickly unstrung by stimulants, and he learned to fear the glass as well as the dice. He was mendacious, as in his accounts of his travels abroad; he was secretive, as in his concealment of Boston as his birthplace; and he could be vindictive, as in his attacks on Longfellow. Yet the core of the matter is that his conscience, indifferent to religion, ethics, or normal human relations, focused in his art. No saint ever analyzed the angels upon the point of a needle more scrupulously than Poe studied the technique of prose and verse. What effect could he achieve in a story by the use of colors—red, black, amethyst, topaz? What in a poem by assonance? Triumphant in such arcana, in life itself he was a defeatist. After his wife's death in 1847 and his rejection, with scandal, by Mrs. Whitman, he wandered South pursuing some final literary will o' the wisps. But in October, 1849 patients in the Baltimore Marine Hospital heard him, dying of delirium tremens, call out till the corridors rang with his voice. "Reynolds! Reynolds!" Floating away on the seas of darkness, he was

invoking the hero of his hideous tale, "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym".

In review, a century later, Poe's performance seems strangely limited in character. Was he not just a magician with one small, black box of tricks? Except in his criticism, he was preoccupied with a cosmos of horror, with

Bottomless vales and boundless floods,  
And chasms, and caves, and Titan woods,  
With forms that no man can discover.

Yet his stories of terror—"Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque," he called them—were, within this realm of "Silence! and Desolation! and dim Night!", varied. He wrote, for example, mere anecdotes, such as the "Tale of Jerusalem"; satires, such as "Loss of Breath"; extravaganzas, such as "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade"; stories dealing with physical sensation, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart"; studies in metaphysics, such as "The Colloquy of Eiros and Charmion". Occasionally, using fear as a background, as in "The Purloined Letter" or "The Gold Bug", he exercised those acute, analytical faculties which made him famous as cryptogrammist and whist-player. Or he coldly multiplied his ghastly details with the deliberate purpose of shocking his readers. In "The Strange Case of M. Valdemar" he pried remorselessly into the processes of death retarded by a hypnotic trance. In "The Man

Who Was Used Up" and in "Loss of Breath" he travestied tales of horror, laughing at the reader in what he called "half-banter, half-satire". Nor were all these tales of fee-faw-fum without echoes of the America of his day. To the major currents of thought he was indifferent, but such fashions as ballooning, sea voyages, and mesmerism find a warped expression in his fiction. And in every tale is evident his careful technique, his extreme particularity in images of sound, and even of taste and smell.

Such self-conscious art seems to justify Lowell's contemptuous verdict that Poe was "two fifths sheer fudge", but the New Englander's admission that the remainder of the fraction was "three fifths of him genius" is nearer the truth. Torn by anxiety, beaten by poverty, Poe traded upon the popular medium of the German tale of horror. Yet his absorption in the world of darkness was at basis sincere. Death and the grave interested him as connected mysteriously with beauty. In all his thinking he "stopped at the door of the tomb"; the faces of men and women, which others found lovely in daily living, attained, Poe believed, their true dignity only when confronted by sorrow and death. This theory of the unity of beauty with sadness, linking him to other creators of the literature of darkness, such as De Quincey, James Thomson or Baudelaire, he repeated often in elaborately reasoned essays, and illustrated

its power, at least for him, in a few tales which, transcending his cautious technique, escape from the very depths of his tortured spirit. In the ecstatic conclusion of "The Fall of the House of Usher" we forget Poe the trickster in Poe the deeply imaginative, poetic spirit. To the sound of the rushing of many waters the castle of Usher collapses, leaving darkness and silence, which Poe felt, from his own sad life-story, were the natural doom of man.

Love of effect mars, too, his poetry. As in his tales of "ratiocination" he trifled with tricks of color and sound. He anatomized the mechanism of rhyme, and "The Bells" or "Ulalume" or "The Raven", apart from such prose disquisitions as *The Rationale of Verse* (1848), bear witness to his exhaustive study of metrics. In this he rivals Sidney Lanier, our most daring technician. Yet again his sorrow engulfs us, as in "The City in the Sea" or "A Dream Within a Dream". He has, he says, changed places with "Israfel", the dark angel of heaven; he sings to the music of an unearthly lyre. No verse in English is perhaps so shrouded in black despair as Poe's. One by one, in "The Raven", he tests the normal consolations of life—and rejects them. To the questions which he asks the sinister bird concerning the hope of immortality, the pleasures of memory, or the peace of submission, the answer is the same: "Nevermore". Life is defeat. Perhaps the intensity of this

mood is itself a contribution to literature. More important, however, is Poe's mastery of one of the offices of romantic poetry. He can take us into a world that never did and never could exist and make it real. He can give airy nothings a local habitation and a name. That this world of romantic reality is unlike that of Shelley and Keats and like that of Coleridge, to whom he was deeply in debt, is irrelevant. The point is that for the first time American poetry displays this power. Poe's place is distinct, if minor, in the history of all verse.

Two years after Poe's death appeared *Moby Dick* (1851), Herman Melville's chaotic novel of man adrift at sea and in the universe. Like the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* and like *The Scarlet Letter*, this book was the work of an isolated, independent thinker, free from the domination of the ethics of Concord or the culture of Cambridge. Moreover, Melville was a bolder spirit than either Poe or Hawthorne. Resembling them in separation from a group, he was dissimilar in his metaphysical quest for a meaning to life. Though aware of the New England transcendentalists, he remained a self-sufficient, if amateur philosopher. Though curious about American social experiments, his intellectual life embraced, if cloudily, cosmic issues. More than this, his flights into trackless realms, comparable with Poe's, originated on the solid earth, or rather

on the deck of a vessel. For years Melville was plain sailor.

After a boyhood in Albany, New York, he began in his seventeenth year his long association with the sea by a voyage to Liverpool, for whose outline we may, perhaps, depend on the opening chapters of his *Redburn*. Three years later, in 1841, he joined in New Bedford the whaler *Acushnet*, and, after eighteen months service, deserted at the Marquesas. Here he lived among cannibals until retrieved by an Australian crew. When he reached Boston in October, 1845, in his mind was the literary capital for several books (*Typee*, 1846; *Omoo*, 1847; *Redburn*, 1849; *White Jacket*, 1850). Autobiographical deductions from these novels are perilous, but the influence upon Melville of his experience on the sea and in the Pacific islands was permanent. Different from Richard Henry Dana, Jr., who wove out of his protected life on *The Pilgrim* his literal novel, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), Melville tasted not merely the hardships of the common mariner but the dregs of life itself.

At the age of thirty-one, then, Melville's mind teemed not only with memories of scenes remote and of peoples strange, but with despondings born of books and introspective hours on shipboard. He bought a farm in the Berkshires; here he wrote his wild tale of the crazed Ahab (*Moby Dick*), gigantic against the background of an actual

whaling voyage. Yet Melville's questioning soul had not discharged all its perilous stuff; in 1852 he published his obscure, jagged, semi-autobiographical book *Pierre*. He had still nearly two score years to live, but henceforth his writing (*Israel Potter*, 1855; *The Piazza Tales*, 1856; *Clarel*, 1876) betrayed slackening powers; both content and style fell under the spell of his abstruse speculations and of his pessimism. He died in 1891, with his real fame still unwon. Only in our own day has Melville's genius become evident and so impressive that he is really judged as if a contemporary writer. The danger is obvious; we may expect a critical reaction from the cult which now proclaims Melville as monumental as Dante and Shakespeare. Titan he was not; bold, original spirit he was.

Much might be said of Melville's minor but compelling characteristics. His descriptive powers are remarkable, whether he shows a tropical beach, a whale-hunt, a storm at sea, or a Nantucket sailor. His style is exact, patient yet often tumultuous, riding the whirlwind, lyrically poetic. He can, as in *Typee*, discuss a social issue and be persuasive about the futility of our industrial civilization. He can depict a noble fever of mind, such as Captain Ahab's, until it sears itself into the consciousness of the reader. He can be humorous, grotesque, pedestrian, tragic. But Melville's paramount intellectual worth is in his courage as he faces the age-old puzzles

of life. Fiercely he comes to grips with the existence, if it does exist, of a moral order in the universe. It is not merely, though he denied this, that his symbolism, as in the "White Whale" standing for the painted malignity of nature, forces us into consideration of problems more dear to Russian than to American literature, but that he does this savagely, uncompromisingly. He is an Emerson freed from gentle Concord, a Hawthorne lifted out of his narrow cell of Puritanism; he is both these and far more than these; he is impatient of systems, derisive of sentimental and conventional solutions of the riddle. Here, he seems to say, are the facts (which his thorny career knew so well). Can your idealism, he challenges, explain death, evil, a malevolent nature? He is a skeptic, fiercely rebellious, Promethean. Though Ahab's warfare with nature is madness, such madness is the only course for manhood. "Wonder ye, then," he cries, "at the fiery hunt?"

Meanwhile, the Cambridge men prolonged in America the impeccable conventions of English literature, in a variety of themes. Longfellow wrote of the village blacksmith and of Nuremberg; Lowell of Sir Launfal, Chaucer, and the war with Mexico; Holmes of the spiritual implication of science, in "The Chambered Nautilus", and of Beacon Street, with its "sifted few", in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. Whittier, of a family of Essex County Quakers, was outside the Brah-



min circle but shared its humanitarianism. To European romanticism, to the conservative Unitarianism of Boston—a countercheck to the heresies of Emerson and Thoreau—to the quickened cultural life of the city he was indifferent, but his passionate interest in abolition made him a national poet. Born in a lonely farmhouse near Haverhill, Whittier's earliest associations were with the Merrimac country,

Where Salisbury's level marshes spread  
Mile-wide as flies the laden bee;  
Where merry mowers, hale and strong,  
Swept, scythe on scythe, their swaths along  
The low green prairies of the sea.

To the end of his life he remembered the local legends of the Indians and the Quakers. Nor did he forget the lessons his poverty taught him as by hard labor in making slippers he paid for his meager education at the Haverhill Academy.

After contributing doggerel to Garrison's *Newburyport Free Press*, Whittier began in 1828, as editor of the *American Manufacturer*, his career as a journalist. Three years later he published his volume of verse *Legends of New England*, and in 1833 his *Justice and Expediency*, an antislavery tract. Hereafter, for nearly thirty years, he fought for emancipation (*Voices of Freedom*, 1849; *The Panorama and Other Poems*, 1856; and *In War Time* 1863), until he could cry out in "Laus

Deo", at the crisis when a constitutional amendment abolished slavery:

It is done!  
Clang of bell and roar of gun  
Send the tidings up and down.

But soon, to quote his own self-delineation, the

. . . dreamer born  
Who, with a mission to fulfill,  
Had left the Muses' haunts to turn  
The crank of an opinion mill;  
Making his rustic reed of song  
A weapon in the war with wrong,

returned to dearer themes. He sang New England, past and present, attaining a noble expression of his poetic power in his idyl *Snow Bound* (1866).

Whittier's rusticity and his consecration to the cause of abolition blurred his achievement as a poet. In metrical range he was narrow; he was guilty of sentimentality, melodrama, prolixity, and even doubtful syntax. Save for a few perfervid lyrics ("Massachusetts to Virginia" or "Ichabod") his humanitarian and patriotic verse was trivial. Yet his imperviousness to changing winds of culture, which helped to squander the talents of Lowell, lent him an especial concentration upon two or three moods. One of these reflects the religious temper of his people. No one has ever arrested the inner peace of the Quaker faith more tenderly than Whittier in

such hymns as "The Eternal Goodness" or in such descriptive passages as those concerning the Quaker home in *Snow Bound*. With the same simplicity he celebrated his native legends, escaping the diluted bookishness of Longfellow, in "Skipper Ireson's Ride" and kindred poems. He could write as lovingly of the farm, the schoolhouse, the hot August day, the shrill locust, the grass beside the pickerel pond as more sophisticated poets have written of the nightingale and larkspur. Stray off into the New England countryside where the foreign immigrant has not yet purchased the land or the merchant erected his factory, and you are in the scenes which Whittier poetized with simple strength.

In another poet appeared more distinctly New England's reawakened love of books and scholarship. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, clinging to his cultural aims during all the strife of his era, wrote in his library of Europe, of the Indian, and of New England legend, always in the mood of

Tales that have the rime of age  
And chronicles of eld.

After his years at Bowdoin College, where, unlike his classmate Hawthorne, he openly proclaimed his ambitions for literary eminence, and after travel abroad, Longfellow became Professor of Romance Languages, first at Bowdoin College and then at Harvard. Throughout his long life, shadowed at times by grief, he was identified with the urbane,

aristocratic side of Cambridge; the popular impression of him as a scholar and elegant poet of banal sentiment has a nub of truth. Longfellow never, like Poe or Melville, challenged society or defied the stars. His was the good fortune to believe in the platitudes of patience, faith, and everyday beauty. When he first revealed in *Voices of the Night* (1839) his gifts of clarity, melody, and sincerity, he had already given hints of different talents in the quiet pages of *Outre-Mer* (1833-1835) and in his translations from the Spanish. He was to write graceful prose (*Kavenagh*, 1849), to compose narrative poems (*Evangeline*, 1847; *The Song of Hiawatha*, 1855; *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, 1858), to attempt poetic dramas, and to keep returning "as to a rock in a weary land", he said, to his enduring version of Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1867-1870). Scholar, teacher, and interpreter of European and American legend he remained, but his immortal part probably resides in his competence in the form of the lyric, in which his first volume demonstrated his power. "A Psalm of Life", "The Rainy Day", "The Old Clock on the Stairs", "Stars of the Summer Night", "Footsteps of Angels", "Nuremberg" were the songs he breathed into the air. How peaceful they are, as if the poet were unaware of personal sorrow! Even now, though they epitomize the oversimplified virtues of the nineteenth century for which we have now substituted a wise irony, they shed

a benediction upon the reader. By these Longfellow must stand or fall.

Perhaps it is idle to defend them. His romanticism was more tasteless than Irving's and more academic. He muddled the purpose of the lyric, making it not a confessional, but a pleasant jingle with a lesson. He repeated benignly, partly because of his temperament, partly because of his long immersion in Europe's Victorian morality, axioms for conduct which in the age of Spengler, Eddington, and Einstein seem so pitifully inadequate. Even when he faced the specter of his era, slavery, he envisaged not the bitter issue but only a burnt-cork negro singing under a yellow moon. Some of the naïve elegance symbolized by his bright-colored waistcoats at meetings of "The Saturday Club", devitalizes these lyrics. The toy electric train and the radio bedtime story drown out the soft music of his "Children's Hour". Was their mission limited to the benison they breathed in his own generation over imperfectly educated Americans, craving solace from the labor of the farm, the mill, and politics? Was the failing Emerson's comment on him, that he had a beautiful soul but that he (Emerson) could not remember his name, prophetic of his fate in our day? Is he merely a memory?

The fact is that in these lyrics is discernible that firmer quality in Longfellow's nature—

"his soul well-knit, and all its battles won"—which irritates yet attracts modern readers. Though he employs a jejune framework, Longfellow refuses to be severed from his belief in an Unseen Goodness, a concept still alluring, as is evidenced by the numerous reactive religions of the supernatural, to twentieth-century men and women wandering drearily in the midst of a machine-laden civilization. Even "A Psalm of Life", in which we are urged solemnly to leave our footprints on a wave-washed beach, and even "The Arrow and the Song", in which the poet counsels humbly the joy of friendship, suggest intangibles of human experience which technocracy has not yet displaced. Ironical, destructive thought pauses a little before the universal theme of Longfellow's songs, faith in the unseen; we wonder whether the illuminations of skepticism are not dearly won if they dull us to his grave peace. To this may be added the truth that an exhaustive reader of Longfellow will discover in him hidden virtues. He will note the gift for narrative verse, the sense of structure, the richness of literary allusion, the vignettes of New England. He will observe the deep scholarship in the translations and the dignity of the fine sonnets. He will also perceive clearly what is delicately suggested in the more familiar lyrics, a sense of the sorrow of life concealed by a noble reticence, as in "The Fire of Driftwood":

We sat within the farm-house old,  
Whose windows, looking o'er the bay,  
Gave to the sea-breeze damp and cold  
An easy entrance, night and day.

...  
We sat and talked until the night,  
Descending, filled the little room;  
Our faces faded from the sight  
Our voices only broke the gloom.

We spake of many a vanished scene,  
Of what we once had thought and said,  
Of what had been, and might have been,  
And who was changed, and who was dead;

...  
The windows, rattling in their frames,  
The ocean, roaring up the beach,  
The gusty blast, the bickering flames  
All mingled vaguely in our speech;

Until they made themselves a part  
Of fancies floating through the brain,  
The long-lost ventures of the heart,  
That send no answers back again.

The temper of another Cambridge writer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, is intimated in his anecdote that when a medical student in Paris he once suffered a pang of homesickness; someone remarked that the tinkle of ice in the champagne glasses brought back memories of the cowbells in the fields of New England. Lover of science, of old-world culture, of the mellow hour of wine and after-dinner speeches, Holmes urged in colloquial prose and in gay occasional verse a reasonable and, preferably, a genial view of the universe.

Holmes' tolerance was a product of the enlightenment of New England; his independent mind broke sharply with the conservative traditions of his forbears, who included Ann Bradstreet and Abiel Holmes (his father), a Calvinistic minister. The melancholy faces of his father's brethren, a peek through a telescope on Boston Common at interstellar spaces, eager reading in eighteenth-century literature alienated him early from the Calvinism which he later pilloried so ruthlessly in "The Deacon's Masterpiece". After graduation from Harvard in 1829 as the class poet, after a taste of the law, he became in 1847 Professor of Anatomy in the Harvard Medical School, where, for almost forty years, he lectured with wisdom and humor. The young medical student who had written on his sign "the smallest fevers gratefully received" had won fame for his pioneer studies in puerperal fever. In recent histories of medicine his face looks out at us, vivacious, intellectual, in the midst of more serious but not more sincere physicians who never wrote a "Stethoscope Song".

For, more than medicine, Holmes loved the world about him. "How I have lived!" he cried; with science and his innate kindness as guides, he ransacked human experience. In the classroom he experimented meticulously, flavoring his learning with poetry, showing his class how the coiled sweat gland resembled, he vowed, a fairy's intestine. In



his toasts he let flow, says Edmund Gosse, "an illuminated cascade of fancy and humor and repartee". In his study he wrote novels (*Elsie Venner*, 1861; *The Guardian Angel*, 1867) containing his lucid rejoinders to the doctrines of his ancestors; in *Elsie Venner* he preached through the law of heredity the limited character of the individual's moral responsibility. Surely no New Englander ever brought science and daily living closer than this witty anatomist, this medical poet. Sensitive to the currents of American religious thought, he tested these and reached sane conclusions, stated poetically in "The Chambered Nautilus", discursively in his breakfast-table books. Science, he declared, forbade dogmatism about our destiny, but proclaimed a plan:

God wills, and the universe articulates His power,  
wisdom and goodness. That is all I know. There  
is no bridge my mind can throw from the "im-  
material" cause to the "material" effect.

In his social thought, too, Holmes kept the middle of the road. He was tinged with conservatism, and to the extremist he tossed the following:

You can't keep a dead level long, if you burn  
everything down flat to make it. Why, bless your  
soul, if all the cities of the world were reduced  
to ashes, you'd have a new set of millionaires in a  
couple of years or so, out of the trade in potash.

Such a man was Holmes in 1857, when James Russell Lowell besought him to con-

tribute to the new Brahmin magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly*, known to his peers as a fellow of infinite jest and as a scientist, inquisitive about the meaning of life. So, in serial form for the magazine, he began his book *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, and with it a literary career of more than thirty years. Inevitably this was a book of conversation, of good talk, so whimsical and wise that in it posterity may know him intimately. Here he sits at the head of the boarding-house table, monologist, dramatist, poet, discoursing of family portraits, education, Shakespeare, old age, rowing, laughter, death, Boston Common, and unfortunate beings who say "Haow?" Who had ever caught the intonations of informal talk in this fashion, save, perhaps, Charles Lamb or Christopher North? Holmes' sequels were fainter (*The Professor at the Breakfast Table*, 1860; *The Poet at the Breakfast Table*, 1872; *Over the Teacups*, 1890), but through them, too, prickled the mirth of the author of "The Height of the Ridiculous". This humorous but thoughtful observer of life remarked, presumably of himself: "You must not think, because the lightning zig-zags, that it does not know where to strike".

Yet Holmes as a man of letters was local; his intellectual centers, were, after all, the Harvard Yard and Boston Common. In James Russell Lowell, however, is mirrored New England's growing consciousness of her part

in national affairs. True, young Lowell was Cambridge-reared and was rusticated to Concord for an escapade during his junior year at Harvard; he knew Margaret Fuller, Thoreau, and Emerson, whom afterwards he was to call "that divine man". Moreover, when abroad, beside the Thames or the Xenil, he was still wistful for the fields where lay the gleaming scimitar of the Charles River. God never made, he was wont to say, a better spot than Cambridge. Mistaken fellow! Yet if his love of New England sounds like a note of exultation throughout his writing, he nevertheless represents far more than Holmes the subjection of her reborn literature to European thought. His restless, almost theatrical career in teaching, writing, and politics took him far from Concord and Walden Pond and from his own Cambridge lawns until he saw even so rare a spirit as Thoreau through satirical, Continental eyes.

By 1848 Lowell had studied law, had married the poetess Maria White, had been a temperance reformer, had published the three numbers of *The Pioneer* (1843), with its contributions from Poe, Hawthorne, and Elizabeth Barrett, and had indulged his versatility in the racy, impassioned *Biglow Papers*, in *A Fable for Critics*, a hilarious, but shrewd catalogue of native writers, and in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. All three books appeared in the year 1848. From 1855, when he succeeded Longfellow as Professor of Ro-

mance Languages at Harvard, his story makes those of his New England contemporaries appear parochial. "Tripped up", as he complained, "by a professor's gown", he nevertheless edited the *Atlantic Monthly* and *North American Review*, spouted commemoration addresses, published volumes of verse and criticism (*Under the Willows*, 1869; *The Cathedral*, 1869; *Among My Books*, 1870, 1876; *My Study Windows*, 1871), travelled extensively in Europe, served as Minister at Madrid and at the Court of St. James's, and in his last decade brought out speeches and essays (*Democracy and Other Addresses*, 1886; *Heartsease and Rue*, 1888; *Political Essays*, 1888). Judged by modern standards, Lowell was our first cosmopolitan man of letters.

Something of the incoherent splendor of his varied life enriches his writing. A restless energy pervades his poems and his literary criticism, leaving the reader often wearied and always puzzled concerning the actual inner principle of his volatile nature. This had, indeed, no pivotal point. Lowell's rueful self-estimate that he had too many thoughts and too little thought was accurate. Very possibly his dissipation of talents will leave his name in American literature merely an inspiring tradition. Place all of Lowell in a single volume; strange incongruities appear. Yet how brilliant are its separate chapters! Beneath the engaging effrontery of Hosea

Biglow's dialect satires on politics and the Mexican War and behind the boisterous doggerel of *A Fable for Critics*, in which Lowell voices enduring judgments on Emerson, Cooper, and himself, is his power to write tenderly of nature and of human feeling, as in the rustic etching, "The Courtin'":

God makes sech nights, all white an' still  
 Fur'z you can look or listen,  
 Moonshine an' snow on field an' hill,  
 All silence an' all glisten;

or in "Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line":

Jes' so our Spring gits everythin' in tune  
 An' gives one leap from Aperl into June:  
 Then all comes crowdin' in; afore you think,  
 Young oak-leaves mist the side-hill woods with  
     pink;  
 The cat-bird in the laylock bush is loud;  
 The orchards turn to heaps o' rosy cloud;  
 Red-cedars blossom tu, though few folks know it,  
 An' look all dipt in sunshine like a poet.

Out of the same warmth rises Lowell's passion in such a lyric as "After the Burial". A transfiguration was visible, it is said, in his face as he read aloud, in 1865, the *Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration*. Re-reading these ardent outpourings of Lowell's youth and middle age, we come to credit his admission that other interests had "dampened his fires". Was he not at heart a poet? It would seem so, though his later verse, as in "The Cathedral", a knotty discourse on religion, trails off into clouds of words. Yet to

the end we sense in him the fervor of the poet. Listen to the last lines of his "Winter-Evening Hymn to my Fire":

Thou sinkest, and my fancy sinks with thee:  
For thee I took the idle shell,  
And struck the unused chord again,  
But they are gone, who listened well;  
Some are in heaven, and all are far from me:  
Even as I sing it turns to pain,  
And with vain tears my eyelids throb and swell:  
Enough; I come not of the race  
That hawk their sorrows in the market-place.  
Earth stops the ears I best had loved to please;  
Then break, ye untuned chords, or rust in peace!  
As if a white-haired actor should come back  
Some midnight to the theatre void and black,  
And there rehearse his youth's great part  
'Mid thin applauses of the ghosts,  
So it seems now; ye crowd upon my heart,  
And I bow down in silence, shadowy hosts!

Lowell had an odd trick of standing aside and surveying quizzically his own talents. This analytical faculty, highly developed, found a formal outlet in the essays, besides those already mentioned, on Shakespeare, Emerson, Thoreau, Carlyle, and Poe. "As a literary critic", wrote Henry A. Beers in 1887, "Lowell ranks easily among the first of living writers". But in the following half century Lowell's exuberance, which contemporaries linked with his beloved self, is less entertaining; his learning is less impressive, and his judgments appear more stereotyped. The truth is that his essays, if intellectual and

persuasive, want that final mysterious perception of the assured critic. As in the poetry, we feel his hurry. The conviction will not down that in writing this criticism Lowell was about to hasten off to another task quite as dear as these fireside talks—such they really are—on “New England Two Centuries Ago”, or “On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners”. His insatiable reading betrayed him into tangled swirls of thought, from which the other Cambridge men were relatively immune. A liberal in his youth, he came, especially after the Civil War, to shrink a little from the rushing tides of the proletariat. Evolution, Marxism, democracy in Walt Whitman—well, these were somehow different from the liberalism of John Stuart Mill. Lowell was, after all, Puritan and Brahmin. But that his mind was puzzled is beside the point; what interests us, thinking of Longfellow or Whittier, is that it was a storm center. In him contends, in one way or another, every impulse of the “New England Renaissance”.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### NATIVISM AND THE LITERATURE OF THE LATER NINETEENTH CENTURY 1865-1900

MEANWHILE, the armies of Grant and Lee paused, breathless. Not so the immigrants, penetrating ever farther westward, dotting the prairies and the Pacific slope with cities. Not so the railroads, flinging their web across river and mountain; nor the clattering industries, ushering in their dominion of smoke and steel. The leviathan America, of which Franklin had dreamed, was becoming a reality. And with the rebuilding and extension of the empire after the Civil War, reappeared, as insistent as the blow of the pioneer's axe or the factory's shrill whistle, the old demand for writing that should record America's experience. Actual life in the democracy—should this not be the grand theme of our literature? Even for men with culture, what else could matter if they had known Antietam and Cold Harbor? What, too, if they had lived with ferryboat and railroad, mine and forest clearing? The ancient conflict raged with renewed fury, between those who would still sing in the tradition of Europe and those who would chant the prairie, the new city, and white-capped Shasta. "I hear America singing", cried Walt Whitman. He did not refer solely to the life of the Eastern



seaboard. The auditorium was all America; the singer the common man.

This was a prolonged struggle. The anomaly of servile letters in an independent republic had long tormented Americans. Immediately following the Revolution, patriotic writing had glorified blandly the fecund spaces between the two oceans. Alas! the verse which clothed the Fourth-of-July sentiments of Barlow and Dwight was the time-honored couplet of English literature. Charles Brockden Brown had introduced into his fiction the American Indian; Irving his Dutchmen of the Hudson; Cooper his Glimmerglass and Uncas. These were not enough. Neither Bryant's fringed gentian nor Longfellow's *Hiawatha* could conceal the debt of this new silver to the old plate of England. Through the thin tracery of new American characters, fresh American scenes, and authentic American anecdotes still shone the European hallmark. Brown was under obligation to Mrs. Radcliffe; Irving and Cooper to Scott; Bryant to Wordsworth; and *Hiawatha*, despite Finnish meters and Schoolcraft's Algonic researches, was warmed-over Victorianism. It was not surprising that Holmes fell back upon a localized homage to Britain in his worship of New England or that Lowell frankly deprecated, as in his animus toward Thoreau, the cultivation of the indigenous American strain in our literature.

Oddly enough, it was the most imitative of our New England poets, Longfellow, who prepared the way for the nativists' momentary victory, which we are about to chronicle. It was not that Americans wished a shaggy literature dealing with the frontier; Easterners perceived the absurdity of the tall tales of "Mike Fink". But they desired writing which reflected their own life experiences. This was partly achieved by Longfellow, though he was silent on the sweat and grime of founding the republic. Emerson, too, had unwillingly stimulated this popular ideal, so responsive to what Thomas Bailey Aldrich called "the rising tide of vulgarity" in literature, by his talk of "the American freeman". But Emerson himself had not voiced, as had Longfellow, the people's need of a sentimental interpretation of their everyday joys and sorrows. There is exaggeration but truth in the recent statement of an English critic that Emerson, though he spoke much of independence, "did little to lift the incubus of Europeanism". What was demanded was not merely new characters and stories drawn at first hand from this turbulent America, but its very spirit, expressed, if possible, in new, virile forms. A writer must do more than Emerson or Longfellow; he must express not merely the philosophical idealism of a few intellectuals or the common mood of sentiment by the fireside, but that intangible, dynamic energy which had now reduced New England to

merely a section of the nation, and had extended the republic to the Pacific.

Six years before the outbreak of the Civil War this prophet had appeared. He was a carpenter, who had worn out a copy of Emerson, carrying it about in his pocket, but who had also thrilled to the life of the city and of the frontier. At the age of thirty-six, when he published *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Walt Whitman had already been a printer, a teacher, an editor; he had piloted Brooklyn ferries and driven New York cabs; he had made his long journey to New Orleans; he had adorned the staff of the Brooklyn *Eagle*; he had written a novel and verse in the orthodox manner. His subsequent biography savors of the dramatization in which he, vain, egotistic, prodigious in health and spirits, delighted. As he strode the open road, he cried: "What do you see, Walt Whitman?" As a volunteer nurse in the Civil War he visited, by his own testimony "from eighty thousand to a hundred thousand of the wounded and sick". He graciously admitted in characteristic vernacular his usefulness "in the simple matters of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism". Year after year he expanded *Leaves of Grass*. Then over the "good gray poet" crept a paralysis, forcing him to resign his government clerkship. In his last days at Camden, attended by his wordy biographer, Traubel, and adoring pilgrims, we see him, a battered hulk, but still

covered with patches of the shining war-paint of his youth. To the end he delivered his poetic utterances on America and on life.

Despite Whitman's concern with simple, human experience, much of his writing remains discrete, evasive, like his personality, which was an amalgam of frankness and reticence, raw vigor and quivering sensibility to beauty. He and Melville, the subjects of some distinguished modern American criticism, are still enigmatic; for this and other reasons they may, perhaps, outlive all others mentioned in this little volume. Whitman, in particular, prevents our solving the mystery of his nature, which one critic explains ingeniously as the presence of a woman's soul in a man's body, by drawing our attention to outward manifestations of his genius. We pause, recalling the cadences of the Bible, over his rhythmic free verse, in which by thousands of sequent images he conveys a sense of the sweep of his America and the vastness of the universe. Or, we note his celebration of the body, sometimes in bleak yet startling catalogues of its members, from "tympan of the ears" to

Leg-fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,  
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the  
heel . . .

sometimes in ecstasy:

Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!

Night of south winds—night of the large few  
stars!

Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Or we observe his absurd lack of humor and self-criticism when he hymns the glories of paternity. We study his garbled use of languages; his absorption of the lingos of current fads, such as phrenology; his strained theology, as in "The Square Deific"; his reiteration of "I", a peculiar blend of egotism and race-consciousness; his flights of sublime poetry; his illiterate bathos. Whitman is the poet of the body, of the soul, of the universe; or he is an ignorant, inspired child.

Such rough edges to his genius hindered Americans' acceptance of their prodigy—a rejection which deeply disappointed Whitman. Americans have seldom been tolerant, until after European recognition, of their eccentric men of letters, and Walt reflected our coarser traits in such sharp relief that we resented acclaim of them by Rossetti, Swinburne and Stevenson as a true, composite photograph of America. For the democrat, "the average man", the pioneer, in Whitman's poetry, were not these individuals as their contemporaries saw them daily, but rather the emotional artist's vision of them, over-colored by his sensibility. This is true. No fireman, no worker at the machine, no prostitute ever vibrated to the cosmic Force with the intensity ascribed to them by this strange

poet. These personalities were projections of himself, Walt Whitman, in the age-old posture of the artist romanticizing common life. Yet he did, if we subtract his caricature, reflect our mind; beneath its workaday exterior he caught, as none before or since has done, the spirit of the new America.

This power, which is Whitman's first claim to greatness, transcends all his follies and minor virtues. He sucked into his poetry scores of idiosyncrasies which, during the post-Civil-War period, were more and more alien to our English kinsmen. He showed, for instance, our preoccupation, even in the humble matters of calisthenics or baseball, with the body. He stressed our interest in the "average man", our sentimentalized religion, our jingoism, tempered with a convenient morality. He strewed his pages with hundreds of American types. He breathed into his poetry our love of equalitarianism, our naïve optimism. If we were not what Whitman says, at least his mosaic of us resembled closely what Europeans conceived us to be. Indeed, the foibles which Whitman attributed to us with joy we are now inclined sheepishly to acknowledge. Yet such articulation of the new America should be bracketed with Whitman's grandiose conception, running through all his writings, of "these States" as an integrated personality. He was fond of thinking of America as a giant of "superior breed" in whom all these moods found free play as in a

distinct entity, working, loving, conquering, and towering above the rest of the world. What, then, of the Civil War, when the giant's body lay bleeding? What of the corruptions of the Tweed Ring or of the "Crédit Mobilier"? What of the agony of the Reconstruction in the South? Ah, these tragedies ruffled Whitman's nerves. Yet, said he with his mixture of metaphysics and faith, such discords merely indicated the nation at war within its own soul. Eventually, there would be harmony; the strong man would rule himself. These days were but the youth of this Democracy, of this colossal personality. Again he was grotesque, but Whitman's dream was closer to national feeling than "The Village Blacksmith". He had snared somehow the elusive spirit of the conglomerate republic.

Whitman's glorification of "these States" was really a poetic version of our imperialism, but he expanded his nebulous doctrine still further; he linked his idea of the new America with his vision of man. The superior American was but a symbol of Divine Humanity. To form this concept many currents of religion, science, and political thought united in Whitman. The long struggle to regard man not as the forlorn creature described by Calvinism, but as divine, as proclaimed by Emerson, culminates in Whitman's monism, in which all creatures, all objects of this visible universe are fused in spirit. From across the sea, too, came the cry:

The great god Man, which is God.

The new Christianity proclaimed the wonder of man; so did the new democracy; so did even the bodiless transcendentalism of New England. Philosophy, social thought, the economic life of America repeated in different keys the common song. Whitman, a religious poet, with the poetic power of the mystic sang it in his rude carpenter's idiom:

My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite,  
I laugh at what you call dissolution,  
And I know the amplitude of time.

He affirmed it of himself, of America, and of man. Such was a dominant belief of the nineteenth century in the ultimate fate of humanity. Whitman, living in a progressive society more fluid than stratified Europe, seemed to see unfold before him the Titanic destiny of the race.

"The God damned human race", Samuel Clemens called it. In the phrase lurks both the insolence of the Mississippi river pilot and the disillusionment of the author of *What is Man?* Whitman's vague beatifics and "unrestricted faith" could not satisfy this troubled spirit, part idealist and part realist, unable to forget the dreadful gap between man's aspirations and his scoundrelism. Clemens, also responsive to the new America, was interested not only in man but in *men*. These he described as he saw them, generous, selfish,



noble, base, sincere, hypocritical, until, toward the end of his life, the darker view triumphed. He cursed a religion which bred a suave Sunday-school morality, a patriotism which murdered Filipinos, a democracy which created a "Gilded Age". Were these the triumphs of a civilization which contested, defying the new science, that this was a homocentric universe, with a snug little heaven for all true believers and all sound democrats? The conception of Clemens as a maladjusted romantic has recently overshadowed the earlier notion of him as a buffoon and boisterous descendant of the frontier humorists. Which portrait of him is accurate? Neither, presumably. In Clemens' adventures from ragged Missouri urchin to white-haired, picturesque, half-civilized man of letters, may be read a common story of the era, that of native intellect and imperfect education forced to confront the staggering philosophy of the incipient machine age. Clemens' pessimism, latent in his temperament, as even his early writings show, was due chiefly to the difficulties of spiritual adjustment which only men such as a Tennyson or a Matthew Arnold could achieve. If Clemens could not make this adjustment, neither, it may be added, could Sidney Lanier or Henry James. Clemens' life story is far more typical of his age than that of the bizarre Walt Whitman.

Thus Whitman's autobiographical *Specimen Days* (1882) depicts a boyhood already

permeated by that indefinable spirit of the growing republic, but it also shows a young man not quite attractive to the normal reader, a young man racing up and down the beach, naked, declaiming Homer and Sophocles. A certain mystical preconception of life already colored Whitman's homespun scenes and simple persons. But Clemens' boyhood, prophetic of his wholesome, matter-of-fact identification with his era, is as real as Huck Finn on the raft or Tom Sawyer painting the fence. He was to describe miners, frontiersmen, river pilots, "con-men", and United States senators, not as symbols of a mysterious eschatology, but as they swore, swapped yarns, or cheated each other. Romantic as he was, Clemens could never dodge a hard fact, whether it was a bad cigar, the absence of soap in a European hotel, or the finality of death. His own recollections of his youth prove his flesh-and-blood associations with raw America. Born of poor parents in the little town of Florida, Missouri, he recalled the mud streets, the village church, the store, the goats, but, most of all, the river, not as an image of the transcendental flow of the universe, but as a body of water on which rough men battled and thus bound the East to the West. "After all these years", he says,

I can picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then: the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning; the streets empty, or pretty nearly so; one or two clerks sitting in front of the Water street stores, with their splint-

bottomed chairs tilted back against the walls, chins on breasts, hats slouched over their faces, asleep —with shingle-shavings enough around to show what broke them down; a sow and a litter of pigs loafing along the sidewalk, doing a good business in watermelon rinds and seeds; two or three lonely little freight piles scattered about the "levee"; a pile of "skids" on the slope of the stone-paved wharf, and the fragrant town drunkard asleep in the shadow of them; two or three wood flats at the head of the wharf, but nobody to listen to the peaceful lapping of the wavelets against them; the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun . . . Presently a film of dark smoke appears . . . instantly a negro drayman, famous for his quick eye and prodigious voice, lifts up the cry, "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin'!" and the scene changes!

Such action, transforming a continent, demanded chroniclers intolerant of the literary code of the New Englanders and more concrete than Whitman's. Clemens' young manhood as well as these days in Missouri were to make him such an historian. After Clemens' whiff of printer's ink in the East, Bixby taught him, then twenty-one, the river; and at about the same time he contributed to a New Orleans newspaper under his unforgettable pseudonym, "Mark Twain". He struck West, prospected in a mine, worked on a newspaper in San Francisco, where he met Bret Harte. He began his career as a lecturer, in the Sandwich Islands! One day he scrawled in his notebook nonsense about a frog filled

with shot. He had learned to tell this authentic scrap of American humor with a solemn face while his auditors became hysterical with laughter. When, in 1867, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* appeared in a New York newspaper, he had really donned his cap and bells forever. Henceforth whatever else he said in sadness or wisdom—and there was much—was received with caution. He had become the national jester. This reputation as a Western humorist he solidified by his brash criticism of Europe in *Innocents Abroad* (1869), and by his skill as a lecturer. After a brief newspaper venture in Buffalo he settled in Connecticut, at his right hand his fastidious wife, Olivia Langdon, at his left the novelists William Dean Howells and Charles Dudley Warner. For years the center of a Hartford literary set, he issued his medley of humorous and serious books (*Roughing It*, 1872; *The Gilded Age*, with C. D. Warner, 1873; *Tom Sawyer*, 1876; *A Tramp Abroad*, 1880; *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883; *Huckleberry Finn*, 1884; *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*, 1889; and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 1894). He became a participant in and critic of national life, and he died in 1910, full of honors and, it is certain, a deep sadness concerning the futility of life.

Although Clemens was known chiefly in his own day as a humorist, it has become the custom in the twentieth century, dwelling upon his deep seriousness, to credit him with a

mysterious duality, to define him as a pessimist in motley. Complex he really was not; the few conflicting attitudes in him were essentially simple, and were characteristic of his generation. He felt, for example, the romance of the marching frontier but also the realism inherent in its drab inhabitants. His adolescence had been influenced by the new Puritanism, that is, an orderly universe ruled by a benevolent God, but he was shocked by the logic of Lyell or Darwin. Such introspection was not unique; thousands of Americans felt the recession of faith during the transition from the agricultural to the machine age. Clemens' greatness lay, I think, not in any subtle inner struggle or in the tragedy of a thwarted personality. His power depended rather upon the full-bodied emotion of his experience and upon his courage in recording this experience; in brief, upon a largeness which elevated these ideas, common to many thoughtful Americans, into the noble and heroic. Although conscious of the meannesses of this bumptious democracy, Clemens, in his life and writing, exemplified somehow its strength. He touched upon every aspect of the western frontier; he analyzed the "Gilded Age"; and he faced the old issue of our subservience to Europe, but while others were lost in the petty fringes of these matters, Clemens, through his oceanic humor and his idealism, seemed to invest them with dignity.

His humor, for example, is often a heartier

version of the horse laughter of "Josh Billings", "Bill Nye", or "Artemus Ward". Yet the adventures of the Duke and the discussion of French in *Huckleberry Finn* or the ridicule of Michelangelo in *Innocents Abroad* are more than mere cacography, dialect, or "tall tale". Such effronteries carry with them an idea, are sometimes near pathos, and are enriched by insight into the tragic incongruities of life. Underneath the fun on the river are the sadness of Clemens' lost youth and the romance of a by-gone age. Often a mere *farceur*, as trifling as "Major Jack Downing", Clemens nevertheless offers in Colonel Sellers, not the grin of the frontier, but true humor interwoven, as in a Falstaff, with a criticism of life.

The same depth enhances his satire. *Innocents Abroad* or *A Yankee at King Arthur's Court* leaves us ashamed of Clemens twice over. His ignorance is monumental. His criticism of the priceless relics of the Middle Ages exposes his own thin culture. He appears to be a Philistine without comprehension of the children of light; and from his boorish jibes may be deduced his adequate expression of the point of view of his constituents toward the past. His discovery that there was brutality in the feudal era; his naïve amazement that the keepers of antiquity's treasures are sometimes unworthy; his senseless attacks upon Scott (who, said he, was partly responsible for the Civil War) and on Christian

Science; all such barbarisms betray his illiteracy. Moreover, we are ashamed that he did not more often direct his superb talent for satire, an elevation of his sense of humor, to American foibles, as in *The Gilded Age*. Nevertheless, though his anger against culture echoes the cheapest Western journalists; though his ethical code relies merely on the simple principles of his frontier civilization, honesty and sincerity; his eloquence ennobles his diatribes. Thus his adoring, effusive study of Joan of Arc, extravagant, like his abuse of the legend of Héloïse and Abélard, enjoys this same enlargement. That romantic strain in him which made him as a boy pause in the dusty street over a page concerning the Maid of Orleans, which made him the chivalrous slave of his wife, which sustained throughout his life his reverence for women, exalts this confused book into beauty.

This same vital force, the real cause of his present hold upon us, invigorates Clemens' pessimism. As the implications of the Darwinian theory filtered through our thought, skepticism crept into the conversation and writings of eminent Americans. Clemens' apothegms were merely common speech, plus his trenchant phrases:

It takes your enemy and your friend, working together, to hurt you to the heart; the one to slander you and the other to get the news to you.

If you pick up a starving dog and make him pros-

perous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.

Pity is for the living; envy is for the dead.

And so on. Why do these pithy sayings, coupled with *What is Man* (1905) and *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, (1899) and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), sting and burn to-day? Not, I believe, because there was any mysterious paradox in Clemens' nature. It was because he reflected the thought of men who saw the pillars of the old temples crumbling; because in this Nevada miner, endowed with the surplusage of energy which is genius, the warfare of the old and the new was more intense, grander even, than in other men. Throughout his life he retained a consciousness of the goodness of life, an innate belief in the antiquated, benevolent universe, and, for this reason, the impact of subversive thought upon him was terrific, devastating. In *Tom Sawyer* he thus describes a drop of water falling from a cave stalactite:

That drop was falling when the Pyramids were new; when Troy fell; when the foundations of Rome were laid; when Christ was crucified; when the Conqueror created the British Empire; when Columbus sailed; when the massacre at Lexington was "news". It is falling now; it will still be falling when all these things shall have sunk down the afternoon of history and the twilight of tradition, and have been swallowed up in the thick night of oblivion. Has everything a purpose and a mission? Did this drop fall patiently during five thousand years to be ready for this flitting insect's



need, and had it another important object to accomplish ten thousand years to come? No matter.

Clemens, like his fellow countrymen, was, at the turn of the century, bewildered amid fading gods and new, bright machines. Twenty-three years after his death the impression persists of a giant, saddened and baffled, but still a giant.

One of Clemens' minor talents was his depiction of scenes on the Mississippi River. Such realism was repeated in the local-color writers, the sentimentalist James Whitcomb Riley (*The Old Swimmin'-Hole* . . . 1883), the earthy John Hay, (*Pike County Ballads*, 1871), the craftsman Francis Bret Harte, and the garrulous pioneer Cicinnatus Hiner ("Joachin") Miller. Harte's latest biographer shows him landing at the Golden Gate in 1854, a "reticent, sensitive-faced young man, halfway between seventeen and eighteen, and already proud of a tiny silken mustache". His early bookish life in Albany, New York, had prepared him less to suffer the rough life of stagecoach and mining camp than to describe it with a reportorial eye. Though in California he knew both Clemens and Miller, though he sallied out of San Francisco among the 'forty-niners, he was an Eastern tourist, armed with pen instead of camera, a disciple of Irving and Dickens and of the *Overland Monthly*. The sharpness of his prose, his knack for the portrayal of rugged types, his humorous dialect

poetry, such as "The Heathen Chinee", hide craftily the true Harte, the watchful literary prospector, or the languid romantic who stands clearly before us in the following entries in his Diary:

New Year's Eve. All by myself. I might have spent the evening in town—but for certain reasons, I have preferred staying by myself.—I have hardly got over my Christmas fears and forebodings.—Memo.—tomorrow will commence my good practices for the future year . . . I have taught school, played the Expressman for a brief delightful hour and have travelled some. I have added to my slight stock of experiences, and have suffered . . . well did the cynical Walpole say that life is a comedy to those who think—a tragedy to those who feel. I both think and feel.

His ambition, he concluded, was distinction in literature.

He won it. Unlike the rougher, more sincere scribes of the West, he coolly capitalized its literary bullion, thus becoming a forerunner in the army of local-colorists. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1870) and "The Heathen Chinee" (1870), as well as his sketches of Spanish California, made Harte famous. But when, in 1871, he settled in the East, to devote himself to letters, his dozen books, some of them novels, left his readers discontented. They liked him better in his rôle of jappannish, meretricious interpreter of the life of the Pacific slope. After a wandering, futile life abroad, he was buried in Surrey, England.

Compared with that of Samuel Clemens, whom in the San Francisco mint he had "trimmed, trained and schooled", Bret Harte's career was a pitiful recession. Yet if we forgive the sentimentality and the deliberate tricks of this technician's short stories, we may return to his stage desperadoes, gamblers, and frontier women who end their lives, true to the ancient and probably false tradition, with kind deeds, preferably melodramatic kind deeds. Flynn of Virginia saves his partner by holding up the beams in the tunnel, and Oakhurst, having gently kissed the Duchess, carves with his bowie knife his own epitaph before he lies down to die under the feathery snow. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat", "Miggles", and "Tennessee's Partner" survive as manifestations of the literature of the new America. Harte was not a Mississippi river pilot, but a clever young man from the East. He understood the need in a national literature of local color.

The resistance, especially in New England, to Whitman, Clemens, and Harte was bitter. We must not forget the priests of the established. Yet these three were the prophets of the new apocalypse of city, river, and mountain. The temporary victory of the first two was to pass in the realization that Harte, despite his insincerity, was, after all, nearer the truth than these raw nativists. American literature of the twentieth century now captures the molten fire of the young nation in

restraints which through the ages have had the consent of the great. It employs neither the demure imitation of Longfellow nor the inchoate jumble of Whitman and Clemens; it understands that liberty is founded upon obedience; it comprehends Matthew Arnold's ideal of "a federated literature". Yet in the 'seventies the nativists' triumph was conspicuous. These literary vagabonds had unrolled a map of the continent. In Louisiana, George W. Cable, in Southern California, Helen Hunt Jackson, in Virginia, John Esten Cooke, in Indiana, Edward Eggleston—all protested indirectly the narrow bounds of the New England ideal, all recorded traits of the country which Whitman had envisaged as a single personality. Most of these, following Harte, were cultivated writers, but a few, such as Cincinnatus Hiner Miller, were wild, diffuse, declamatory, and, like Whitman, refused to be civilized. Perhaps the crest of nativism is reached in this "Oregon Byron", born in a covered wagon, fraternizing with Shasta Indians, invading in London the salons of the Pre-Raphaelites, writing his *Songs of the Sierras* (1871), grandiloquent in language and incident, but grand, too, in their *bravura*, attempting to paint in verse the sublime panorama of Far Western scenery.

Balance is needed. In the South, though its literature retailed local wares, as in Augustus Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), the keynote was conservatism. The successors of John

Pendleton Kennedy, an imitator of Irving, and of William Gilmore Simms, a picaresque, racy novelist under the spell of contemporary romanticism, were a group of young poets, Paul Hamilton Hayne, Henry Timrod, and Sidney Lanier, all echoing in a belated Charlestonian renaissance the literature of England. And in Massachusetts, its golden day done save for the white-haired survivors of the Concord and Cambridge groups, intellectual spinsters now etched village life in New England, sometimes in stark lines, suggesting all too clearly, in contrast to the abundance of the Western writers, the change in her destiny; sometimes gently. Sarah Orne Jewett, says her biographer, "looked at nature in its milder moods, and at mankind in its more subdued states of tenderness and resignation". Sunbonnets and gingham dresses! The "banker-poet", Edmund Clarence Stedman, fluid and florid in verse and criticism, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who declared Whitman a "hollow affectation", illustrate the tradition of imitation, slightly wilted, unsupported by the talents of Longfellow or Lowell. The popularity of Aldrich's "Baby Bell", appearing in the same year as *Leaves of Grass*, and of his *Songs and Sonnets* (1906), is an extravagant example of the genteel tradition, of the withered elegance of writers who denied the significance of Clemens and Whitman.

Yet the intellectual life of New England,

best symbolized in Emerson, had not really degenerated into filigree, into literary samplers. Our perspective on the post-Civil War Period has been widened by the posthumous poetry of Emily Dickinson, as supreme in her self-contained medium as Whitman in his, and, in a sense, his complement. In this poetess, who published only a few poems during her lifetime, burned silently a flame like the white light of the sun, and as bold in its relation to the universe. Scholars and dilettantes still argue the facts of her outward life, which she passed in Amherst, Massachusetts. Whether frustrated by an unhappy love affair, whether, indeed, frustrated at all, she lived a life of inner concentration, in which developed discriminating shades of feeling—whimsical, tragic, ironical, gay, meditative, wry, mocking, wistful.

Overtones of her loneliness, of her friction with her father, of her New England background penetrate her poetry, but are dissolved in the crystal of her condensed quatrains. Slowly she wrote these fragile lyrics, each surcharged with the momentary mood, wrote them for herself or for a friend, on a stone in "coat of elemental brown", on "a certain slant of light, on winter afternoons", on tears, on exultation, on death—always, in brief, on the spirit alone within itself and facing, frail thing, without the anodynes of religion or philosophy, the universe formed of beauty and steel. We enjoy her playfulness, when in

"the orchard of the world" she feels herself to be:

A guest in this stupendous place,  
The parlor of the day!

or her satire, when the preacher declaims on  
"breadth":

Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence  
As gold the pyrites would shun.  
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus  
To meet so enabled a man!

We feel her intense, introactive, almost repell-  
ing life of the spirit:

The soul selects her own society,  
Then shuts the door.

Nevertheless, her unwritten context concern-  
ing the helplessness of man in the universe is  
most memorable. She says:

I reason, earth is short,  
And anguish absolute  
And many hurt;  
But what of that?

and

A piercing comfort it affords  
In passing Calvary,  
To note the fashions of the cross,  
Of those that stand alone  
Still fascinated to presume  
That some are like my own.

One may relate Emily Dickinson's integrity  
of mind to the passion for actuality pervad-  
ing America, expressed now not in the bawl-

ing of pioneers but in the gossamer strength of a woman's soul. Bare truth suffices for her, this incandescent part and parcel of God, as she might have been called by Emerson—whose essays were among her treasured books.

In the literary scales, perhaps, one Emily Dickinson outweighs a library of frontier literature, but Sidney Lanier's spiritual life, though differently oriented, restores the balance still further. Music was the center of his being, both in the symphonies which he himself, a distinguished flutist, led and in his love of the poetry of Shelley and Keats. He looked not to the West, but toward New England; he revered the Cambridge men, not Whitman, whom he denounced as "a mudsill". A Georgian, equipped to cultivate the twin arts, he was engulfed by the war, and by its hardships broken in health. There followed his later life of scattered purposes; he became lawyer, lecturer, musician, and writer of pot-boilers, until he was consumed partly by tuberculosis and partly by the feverish intensity of his ambitions. In his *Science of English Verse* (1880) Lanier tried to prove the unity of music and poetry.

In this he never succeeded. His studies in metrics, though profound, are sometimes as occult as his poetic imitations of the birdcalls of the southern swamps. His verse attempts an impossible application of the musical principles of sound, pitch, duration, tone-color. He



records in excessively sweet—a favorite word—imagery his adoration of the sun, the trees, the silver notes of the flute against the background of orchestral violins, or of the tension of nature at dawn. An important fact concerning Lanier is his resistance to the time spirit. "Trade" broke in and formed the ground tone of "The Symphony"; it paganized his worship of nature and of "universal love". Yet he never yielded to what he called the gristle of the raw Western literature. Amid war and reconstructions he remained a poet, and if in "The Crystal" he is childish, and elsewhere feminine and verbose, in "The Symphony" or in "At Sunrise" he rises to lyric ecstasy, almost fulfilling his wish "to sail with Shelley o'er a bluer sea".

On the whole, toward the end of the century, with Whitman dying, with Emily Dickinson undiscovered, the dominant temper of this period of American literature lived in its fiction. This temper subdued the nativists' realism to old traditions and to a fresh critical spirit, born of our richer culture and of our more intimate connections with Europe. We approach, indeed, the modern era. Daily life fiction still craved, but with a scientific flavor or with the orderliness of those efficient machines which had displaced agricultural labor; realism thrived, not in the spirit of Clemens, but in that of Balzac or Zola. As if symbolical of this modified actuality, William Dean Howells was reared on an Ohio farm but was

classicized by New England and Europe. Patiently he set himself the task of depicting faithfully poor real life with her foolish face, visible everywhere about him, not in the shrill cries of cowboys, but in the multifarious commonplace of the American village. Unlike Hamlin Garland, whose pictures of the farm were sometimes acrid, or Ambrose Bierce, whose tales of deliberate naturalistic horror shocked the 'nineties (*In the Midst of Life*, 1891; *Can Such Things Be*, 1893); or Stephen Crane, who in *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893) or *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) mocked orthodox virtues, or unlike, most of all, Marion Crawford, who fled into rococo romances, Howells told drab stories of everyday Americans, told them simply, serenely.

A son of the West, but more truly a child of literature (see *My Literary Passions*, 1895), Howells, beginning as a poet, drank deep in Italy of the older cultures. On his return he was for fifteen years associated with the *Atlantic Monthly*, and afterwards, with the "Editor's Study" and "Easy Chair" of *Harper's Magazine*. For the remainder of his long literary and social life we see him in New York and Boston, "so sweet, so clean and so strong", as Clemens said of him enviously, uncompromising in his distaste for both romanticist and naturalist. In novel after novel he related in monotone those ordinary episodes whose simple truth challenged other

novelists' "monstrous disproportion" of love-making and marriage. His subjects were neither the pony express nor the "international" contrasts of Henry James, but the quiet adjustments forever taking place in middle-class American society. No American writer, not even Hawthorne or James, has stood more firmly for reasoned criteria in the writing of fiction. This must remain his glory, however little the twentieth century loves his "reticent realism".

Howells' "fidelity to experience and probability of motive" becomes impressive when we survey the scope of his writing—thirty successful novels, all illustrations of his thoughtful definition of narrative in *The Art of Fiction* (1884). His early tale *Their Wedding Journey* (1871), in which he made his transition from travel book to novel, relates without plot experiences of a young couple taking the conventional bridal trip across New York State. *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873), still with a background of travel, displays his experimentation with his theory, in its way as iconoclastic as Whitman's, of elaborate photography of the commonplace. At last, through *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and *The Kentons* (1902), the pressure of his skill and sincerity bore down into relative inferiority the prophets of tragedy, sensation, and illicit love—"the most hackneyed theme", said Howells, "in litera-

ture". Nor can we be sure, though undoubtedly Howells lacked the deepest imaginative power, that he was incapable of handling emotional subjects. In the evolution of his art, we may trace his interest not merely in surface realism, but, witness *A Modern Instance*, in inner fact. Fascinated, we watch the disintegration of agreeable Bartley Hubbard. There, finally, he sits, in the divorce court, gross, with the ring of fat around his neck.

It appears far-fetched, perhaps, to bind the other eminent novelist of the epoch, Henry James, to the national passion for actuality. Yet this expatriate's exposure to European culture must not blind us to his haunted preoccupation with American scenes and characters. He longed to immerse himself in our civilization, but found it inadequate material for his complex mind and art. The antithesis of Clemens, he nevertheless wooed facts, as he saw them in mental processes, as revealed by his craft of psychological realism. It is incredible that this attitude was debtless to the spirit of his country where he passed his youth; his devotion to Hawthorne enamored him of the older man's ruthless probing of the laws of the mind. After an education abroad and in New England, James returned in 1869 to Europe, to write, to make reluctant visits to the United States, and, in 1915, to become a British citizen. He represents in esoteric form the rising protest, apparent in Howells, not against realism, but against real-

ism without the checks of culture and perspective.

Gradually, this point of view led James to master European culture for its own sake, to ensky the novel as a holy medium of art in which action dissolves into dissection of subtle feelings and into fine-spun characterization; in which narration melts into a style so diaphanous, so ductile, so delicately perceptive, that for the devotee of James it becomes the ultimate in prose-writing, but for the neophyte merely iridescent vapor. "For God's sake", wrote his brother William, the psychologist, "speak out!" The material for such novels was a sophisticated society, which, say some critics, never has existed, at least as James portrays it. Yet he recreated it again and again, ever more reverently, in ever more intricate sentences, described it for itself, or set it in juxtaposition with America, sometimes by showing Europeans here, sometimes by reversing the process. For America had, he declared,

no State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches, nor great universities, nor public schools —no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no litera-

ture, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class,—nor Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably, as a general thing, be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out. The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, as one may say.

James's analytical, somewhat contemptuous analysis of American life during his apprenticeship (*Roderick Hudson*, 1875; *The American*, 1877; *The Europeans*, 1878; *Daisy Miller*, 1879; *Washington Square*, 1880; *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881) was later dwarfed by his delight in the European scene itself (*The Tragic Muse*, 1890). Afterwards, in the third, concluding phase of his art, to employ his own divisions of his career, in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), he exhibited the final stages of his exotic critical faculty and labyrinthine style. Inspired by his own perfection, shocked at the early novels' simplicity, a fault still invisible to the average reader, he accomplished the stupendous feat of rewriting his entire body of fiction. In America during his lifetime, suspicion of James was rife, as an exile, as an esthete, even as a humbug vending a bogus European intellectual

life. It is otherwise now. That prayer of his to an Art which, he said, had failed him never, is recognized as sincere. His flight from America hints at the superficiality of the American culture which this chapter has described, and his skill in the first form of the psychological novel prepares us for civilized writing which, at last, in the twentieth century rivals that of Europe.

CHAPTER SIX  
AMERICAN LITERATURE IN  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY  
1900-1933

THE incongruities in American literature at the edge of the century are represented by the stunning contrast of Walt Whitman and Henry James. Beside the highstrung impressionism of Stephen Crane, the artificial story-telling of F. Marion Crawford, the idealistic, "U.S.A." novels of Winston Churchill, and the philosophical poetry of William Vaughn Moody, now crouched the sociological novel, a grotesque offspring of realism and industrialism. Frank Norris, a journalistic dynamo, damned, in *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1902), the soulless buccaneers of railroad and exchange. Upton Sinclair, in *The Jungle* (1906), cudgelled the meat packers, and Nietzschean Jack London, at seventeen "a drunken bum", to quote his own words, deified Wolf Larsen, brutal sea captain, and directed embittered assaults upon this civilization of machines. Realism was tinged not with the romance of Clemens, but with the pessimistic warp of naturalism. Yet Sinclair and London, or Robert Herrick, the intelligent projector of the "problem novel", were tepid compared with brooding Theodore Dreiser, who began in 1900, with *Sister Carrie*, his protracted siege of the citadels of capitalism, institutionalism, and even of man's



fate. Dreiser, indeed, spanning both the 'nineties and our own age, was the brigadier of writers determined, in the words of an English critic, "to bring all life within the scope of the novel".

"*All life!*" The quotation's third word demands italics. In village novel or negro spiritual, in ironic prose fantasy or austere New England verse, in mordant criticism or disillusioned biography, American literature of the twentieth century sustained, though with strange veneers and inlays of romanticism, the realism of the preceding epoch. Still flourished the anglophile, the genteelist, the detached critic, but the base of the heady cocktail was a mixture of frankness, energy, and aggressive distrust of nineteenth-century moral idealism. After all, Norris and Sinclair had been naïve; had they not hoped to reform the social structure? Now the naturalists counselled the acidulous depiction of evil, with indifference and cynicism as their props. Moreover, in the thirty-three years since *Sister Carrie*, the quest for all moods of human consciousness, with the use of every possible experimental form, has become more diversified, from the humorous chatter of Booth Tarkington's adolescents to Robinson Jeffers' grim symbolism. The war intensified this introspection, transforming skepticisms into neuroses; the catastrophe will, perhaps, remain for later historians a boundary line. For in the postwar years pessimism sank into futilitarianism. O. Henry's

curiosity concerning "what's around the corner" became F. Scott Fitzgerald's gin-drinking smartness in *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), and then disgust, mingled curiously with the beautiful, in the work of Conrad Aiken and Wilbur Daniel Steele. In the novel a similar excess is visible; Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920) is temperate compared with his hysterical *Elmer Gantry* (1927) or his tumultuously frank *Ann Vickers* (1933). Poetry, too, has run a parallel course. To preserve equilibrium in judging our brood of dragons' teeth, we must look up at the few calm spirits who still find life not ignoble, if sad: Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Willa Cather.

The realism of the 'nineties, momentarily qualified by the historical romance, elicited many writers, necessarily neglected in this short volume, whose careers are epitomes of the epoch's changes. Of these the most gifted was Booth Tarkington, who, though early interested in the realism which his native region, Indiana, had fostered through Edward Eggleston, John Hay, and James Whitcomb Riley, was for a time in love with rapier, brocade, and lace. "I want", Robert Louis Stevenson had cried, "to hear swords clash!" *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1900) was a shade more distinguished than other American romances of cavalier and court. But Tarkington, though of a cultivated family and Princeton-bred, heard more distinctly—the changing times

demand it—the voices of everyday Americans. He had already experimented with local color in *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899). When, by 1913, there could be no doubt whither the road of fiction was leading, he published his gentlemanly, realistic studies of boyhood in a small, midland town (*Penrod*, 1914; *Seventeen*, 1916). Tarkington's more substantial novels (*Alice Adams*, 1921; *The Midlanders*, 1923) place him as a mild-mannered critic of his generation, without the tarragon of Lewis. After all, Goth Tinker, the vulgar business king in *The Plutocrat* (1927), wins our respect, and Alice Adams, in the novel of that name, though suffering from the tawdry standards of her small town, mounts, finally, the stairs of the employment office, to find it flooded with sunlight. Perhaps this sentiment is Tarkington's virtue. Stenographers and business men derive happiness from American life, despite the jeremiads of Lewis and Dreiser.

More and more it appears, in contrast to the "Renaissance of New England" that our modern writers strike fire chiefly from the flint of their native soil. Edith Wharton's observations in modern Europe, James Branch Cabell's vagabondage in a land of fantasy, or Joseph Hergesheimer's escape into exotic regions of fan, silk, and jewels are less vital than the ruthless surgery of American life in Lewis, Anderson, and Dreiser. Indeed, the romantic apostasies seem trivial, save, perhaps,

Cabell's (*Jurgen*, 1919; *The Silver Stallion*, 1926), with his intricate fancies and his stabs of irony. We return rather to the more earthy writings, to *Alice Adams*, to Hergesheimer's *Java Head* (1919), and to Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911). Educated abroad, a disciple of Henry James, endowed with a cultivation and leisure unknown to most of her feverish contemporaries, Mrs. Wharton contributed, beginning with an historical novel (*The Valley of Decision*, 1902), a series of brilliant if artificial diagnoses of society.

Yet her depictions of aristocracy, European and American, her cool, sophisticated style seem but caryatides to one small, simple building, the novelette *Ethan Frome*. For the first time, if we except Henry James, who would have sublimated the physical agonies of this story, a completely cultivated writer described the realities of the New England village. *Ethan Frome* is more weighty than *Summer* (1917) because it is more than an episode; it is more persuasive than *The Age of Innocence* (1920) because its tragedy is more universal, at least in the America of the early twentieth century. In it with a terrific concentration, yet with a perspective closely allied with the book's skilful structure, Mrs. Wharton records the horror of three lives in worn-out New England, and so, symbolically, that of thousands of others. Slowly, surely, Ethan turns the course of his sled, bearing Matt, down the long hill toward the tree

which is to destroy them, to chain him for ever to Matt, whom he loves, and to Zenia whom he loathes. Compared with this triptych of suffering, etched dispassionately by Mrs. Wharton, the work of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (*The Bent Twig*, 1915; *The Brimming Cup*, 1921) is diffuse, that of Edna Ferber merely pictorial, and that of Ellen Glasgow more limited in technique.

In all these writers linger the modifying tendencies of romanticism, humanitarianism, genteelism, and the love of old criteria of art. The force of twentieth-century realism triumphs in Sherwood Anderson's weevil-like descent into the subconscious mind, in Sinclair Lewis' serio-comic valentines caricaturing the stupidities of American life, and in Theodore Dreiser's relish for the ugly. Indeed, though the murky cloud of Dreiser hovered over the 'nineties, it still darkens the landscape. A literary ogre, with a surprising compassion for the lowly, he conquers not merely by the virility of his intellect, but by his sincerity. Writing slowly, awkwardly, he studies (*An American Tragedy*, 1925; *Dawn*, 1931) relentlessly man as an animal. Follower of Zola, egotist, sex-obsessed, he wonders, not in the divine sense of the word, but hopelessly, concerning blundering America with its poor whites and electric chairs, concerning the iron universe in which humanity is a speck of dust. Man is not, as the poet sings, made weak by time and fate; but by them

he is obliterated. In this brazen universe, man's loneliness, so emphasized by this twentieth-century fiction, is made more human, more pathetic by the novels of Sherwood Anderson, who still clutches, unlike Dreiser, at the old, unrealizable beauty, still strives to avoid, in symbolism, the harsh fact of determinism.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the sadness of Dreiser and Anderson, we quicken to Lewis' robust, cynical laughter. In spite of his sincere anger, one cannot overcome the feeling that Lewis enjoys being the naughty boy at the party; he reminds us of the clever undergraduate, steeped in satirical half truths, who hoots at the honest yokels in faculty and student body. Lewis rides a thesis, not exactly new in our story, that Americans are Philistines. Business men, doctors, clergymen, and social workers—all are zanies in suits of selfish professional armor. This hypocritical mail Lewis penetrates easily with javelins of hard, steely wit, well-aimed, collected from his enemies themselves with more zeal than Henry Thoreau exhibited in his search for arrowheads near Walden Pond. It is an amusing and devastating warfare. Out of Lewis' epigrammatic tracts on America, his places and persons have entered into our common speech. We speak ruefully of "Main Street"; into our club steps George F. Babbitt, prosperous, complacent, oleaginous.

Perhaps *Main Street*, Lewis' first dis-

tinguished book, and his most heavily documented investigation of American dunderheadedness will remain his memorable contribution to our era of self-criticism. His later diatribes hardly do more than kick about the old corpses already killed in this novel. *Babbitt* (1922) is a reverberation of his preliminary shriek of disgust. Yet throughout his recent novels shines a compensating sympathy, especially for the intelligent persons caught in this civilization. Lewis lacks that quality of the great novelist, deep pity for human beings, but he is sorry for the thwarted Dodsworth, and *Arrowsmith* (1925), though sardonic concerning corruptions in the medical profession, offers glimpses of the tragedy of the idealist. In fact, Lewis is becoming self-conscious about the platitudes of virtue which rear themselves in life, Antaeus-like. If God did not strike him dead when Lewis defied Him in Kansas City, if He seems as non-existent as the justice for which Ann Vickers fights, Lewis is, nevertheless, still strongly curious about Him and also about the simple codes of his dull countrymen. His novels omit, of course, those characteristics of our democracy which make it a livable place—the sensible schools, the cheerful village life, the wholesome individualism—but he is painfully aware of our persistent belief in these. After building the triumphant pyre on which he hurls the faith of Ann Vickers, Lewis himself is not altogether pleased with his own bonfire. The

old honesties of the good life have a disturbing way of reviving. We may, finally, smile a little, as Lewis himself smiles, at his violence, and yet be content with his style; trenchant, compelling, humorous, it has the touch of the able craftsman.

Dreiser, Anderson, and Lewis responded to the neurotic tempo of the postwar years; mankind's bewilderment confirmed their previous futilitarian utterances. Yet, for them, the war, if it added another sooty thread to their fiction, hardly altered their innate pessimism. Because of the war, however, a few novelists, whose real power is still unplumbed, attracted attention by their submergence in the complexes of this excited period. John Dos Passos, in *Three Soldiers* (1921), *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), *42nd Parallel* (1930), gropes amid sensations born of intense and sordid living. Ernest Hemingway, his cynicism leashed but sneering, recounts in *A Farewell to Arms* (1930), with effective dialogue, the carnal love affair of a soldier and a nurse. In this and in Hemingway's other writings—he began as a short-story writer—he reports feelings in terms of energy, behaviorism, and complete frankness. Yet the nettles of Hemingway's disillusionment and sophistication mask a sensitive flower; he has merely discovered a novel way of being sentimental. The list of vigorous rebels should include William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, 1930) with his studies in madness and unnatural passions. These



young writers are enjoying the licence in form and subject toward which realism has led American fiction.

In the midst of this clinic on American life, in which, one suspects, the diagnosticians are as diseased as the patients, our greatest novelist assumes almost the character of a healer. As detached as Mrs. Wharton, as forceful as Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, in novels revealing influences so different as the frontier, George Sand, and Sarah Orne Jewett, breathes upon us, not anger, not despair, but calm and peace. She recalls the scenes of her youth when she saw the Bohemian immigrant battling with the Nebraska prairie (*My Antonia*, 1918). Or she portrays the soul's starvation of Thea Kronberg, born for music (*The Song of the Lark*, 1915). The neurotic boy, the agony of the pioneer, the bigotry of the small town, death by the bayonet in the trenches, the futility of outward achievement, and, indeed, all the outrageous fortunes bewailed by our neurotic novelists are in her pages. But *Antonia* is close to the earth, Claude, Professor St. Peter, Mrs. Forrester, Auclair, Old Rosicky, and all her other "people", as she calls her characters, have fulfillment; they drink deep of life and find it good. This sense of the past, this conviction that the roots of life are sweet, this water from the deepest springs of the race—these intuitions ennoble the novels of Miss Cather. Moreover, her tranquil pictures of prairie and

Western town, of Spanish Southwest and Quebec, with storm-buffed ships from France at anchor beneath the Rock, live in a deceptively simple style. Ease and strength do not wholly explain its beauty; into it has entered that contemplative mood which is, quite apart from her experimentation in the later novels with symbolism and other modern technique, Miss Cather's source of power.

In comparison with the relatively simple trends of twentieth-century fiction, modern American poetry, in its variety of subjects and forms, in its interminable lists of versifiers seems, at first, an insoluble acrostic. In it meet the English tradition, sustained in the 'nineties by William Vaughn Moody and later by the Arthurian poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson; imagism, with its particular philosophy of verse, in Amy Lowell and her school; the extravagances of the Western poets, children of Walt Whitman; and hysterical experimentation, as in the typographical antics of Gertrude Stein and "e.e. cummings". Beginning about 1915, this movement gained momentum in anthologies, magazines, and "Poet's Corners"; by the present year (1933) it excels, at least in abundance, any previous period in the history of our poetry. Yet the whorls in this complex pattern are decipherable. Like the fiction, to whose influence it is in debt, it vibrates with energy, exults in frankness. In one way or another these poets, too, aim to reflect *all*

life; they crave freedom of subject and unconventional forms, rhythm instead of rhyme, free verse instead of the stave and quatrain, the hard, clear image instead of thoughtful phrase and emotion recollected in tranquillity. What Robert Frost sings of the swish of the mower's scythe is true of nearly all of this contemporary poetry: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows".

"Poetry burns out of it", said an English reviewer of Frost's first volumes (*A Boy's Will*, 1913; *North of Boston*, 1914), "as when a faint wind breathes upon smouldering embers". In this and in succeeding poems Frost wrote of New England, carrying on the tradition of Bryant, but in strong, simple words endowed with mysterious depths of humor and passion. The casual reader is apt to dismiss Frost as merely a skilful photographer upon whose sensitive mind is registered the usual scenes of New England: her swift streams, blueberries, rocky pastures, the white house set back from the country road, the cow bellowing on a knoll against the sky. It is easy, without intimacy with his work, to miss his mastery, not of dialect—which he abhors—but of the inflections of daily New England speech, and to overlook, in particular, the connotative power in his reticent verse. Behind, for example, the simple sentence: "Good fences make good neighbors" lies an indelible mood of the speaker and of New England.

Frost's face, so suggestive of his New England traits, lights up with amusement at reading too literally into his poetry ulterior meanings. Yet such overtones haunt us: the terrible loneliness in "The Death of the Hired Man" and "An Old Man's Winter Night"; the hatred in "The Code"; the agony of bereavement and the insanity in "Home Burial"; the bitterness of perpetual separation in "Not to Keep"; the deep happiness of toil in "Mowing". Frost sets down the facts, but these facts stir in us poignant trains of thought, unanalyzable, but penetrative of our deepest memories, of, perhaps, our subconscious minds. Emotion is profound; form is restrained. There is no articulated synthesis. For each instant we are identified with the New Englander, sharing his intense, personal reaction to the universe and his momentary union with the experience of humanity. Each poem is granite, concealing the fiery lava beneath. It is, indeed, romantic poetry, extracting, with the utmost frugality of phrase, magic from a load of hay, a stone wall, or a pane of frosted glass, but it is romantic poetry of "the middlin' way"—a phrase which defines by implication the aims of Frost as a poet.

Edwin Arlington Robinson, too, attuned to old culture (*Merlin*, 1917; *Lancelot*, 1917; *Tristram*, 1927) and to the intellectual life for its own sake, ponders, like Frost, upon the struggle of man in New England, but sees

it as an emblem of his quarrel with the universe. Frost's emotional reaction to life is, on the whole, cheerful, or, at least, reposeful. Robinson, however, finds no earthy content, born of nature and the strength of these New Englanders, in the rustle of birches or in the cloud-flecked moon on a windy night. He perceives too clearly the defeat of the mediocre mind beaten by temperament, circumstances, or death. Distrustful of violent poetic forms, skeptical through introspection and long study of man's destiny, Robinson stressed, first in his verse romances not unlike Matthew Arnold's intellectualized *Tristram and Iseult*, and also in short, cryptic vignettes ("Miniver Cheevy") the futility of existence. Richard Cory, smiling, well-groomed, puts a bullet in his brain; Lorraine announces that she is going to the devil; Mr. Flood gets hopelessly drunk. To Robinson such are "bewildered children" in a chaotic universe, whose meaning is unintelligible if, indeed, a meaning exists. Even the man whom Ben Jonson entertains at Stratford betrays the common despair.

"No, Ben!" he mused; "it's Nothing. It's all Nothing.

We come, we go; and when we're done, we're done

...

Spiders and flies—we're mostly one or t'other—"

Though a Puritan strain, an old world culture, and a crisp, direct form of expression,

Degenerate sons and daughters,  
Life is too strong for you—  
It takes life to love life.

It is a remarkable book, and in comparison Masters' later volumes are inconsequential. If the autobiographers of *Spoon River* remind us too often of their diseases and divorces, if they have forgotten too readily their hours of laughter, they are, nevertheless, authentic. Masters thus cudgelled soundly the dowdy villagers of Howells and Tarkington. On fiction and on poetry the realism of *The Spoon River Anthology* left an ineffaceable stamp.

Yet the American village, Vachel Lindsay believed, was a visible proof of the goodness of democracy, of life, and of his own "gospel of beauty". This creed he had derived from his boyhood in Springfield, Illinois, where he began his adoration of Lincoln, from his study of painting at the Chicago Art Institute, from his tour of poetic evangelism throughout America, and from his passion for rhythms, in which he was affected by negro melodies. Such influences shaped a mind in which contended illiteracy and true poetic feeling. I have heard him argue the superiority of Mary Pickford's art to Dante's, and when laughter had subsided, stir his audience by chanting "The Golden Whales of California", "The Daniel Jazz", and "The Congo". By marginal directions, by recitative, by exhortation, he made his listeners feel poetry as a social experience. Under his

tireless baton they shared with him Bryan's silver periods, the sizz and whistle of the calliope, the rumble of the prairie train, the primitive exultation of the blacks in the bar-room as they recalled the ancient voodoo dance:

Then I saw the Congo, creeping through the black,  
Cutting through the jungle with a golden track.

Lindsay became the poetic showman of the democratic virtues of the Middle West.

From the tambourine to the banjo! Carl Sandburg's exhilaration rivals Lindsay's, but lacks his mellow, wholesome content in rural democracy. A brother Illinoisian, he was successively driver of a milk wagon, grain laborer, bootblack, sceneshifter, hotel dishwasher, professional baseball player. He carried the principles of the free-verse writers to the ultimate, often stripping his lines of all save savage phrases, and introducing bristling colloquialisms, as in his familiar poem "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter":

You come along . . . tearing your shirt . . .  
yelling about Jesus.

Where do you get that stuff?

What do you know about Jesus?

Jesus had a way of talking soft and outside of a few bankers and higher-ups among the con-men of Jerusalem everybody liked to have this Jesus around because he never made any fake passes and everything he said went and he

helped the sick and gave people hope.

. . .  
I'm telling you Jesus wouldn't stand for the stuff  
you're handing out. Jesus played it different.

Sandburg's emphasis is not upon the face of Booth entering heaven, as in Lindsay's poem, but upon the steerage, the sweaty night shift in the steel factory. Fiercely he indentifies himself with the machine, crying out:

Lay me on an anvil, O God,  
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike,  
Drive me into the girders that hold the sky-  
scraper together.

On the prairie, in the congested city, in the whirr of the fast express, Sandburg experiences a barbaric joy.

Sandburg's interest in colossal, industrial America now includes history. He has turned biographer (*Abraham Lincoln, the Prairie Years*, 1926); both he and Masters have written lives of Lincoln. Biography, indeed, in twentieth-century America is not the least interesting province of our wider culture. It reflects not only our curiosity about our past, but the influence of European method. Its types vary, from the analytical, introspective *Education of Henry Adams* (1907), an invaluable confession of an intellectual's experience in the latter part of the nineteenth century, to Van Wyck Brooks's probing into the essential Mark Twain (*The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, 1920). Amy Lowell's *John*



*Keats* (1925), Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), and Gamaliel Bradford's portraits of eminent Americans counterbalance perceptibly the blank in the early eras, in which biography was chiefly a family or a campaign affair. The drama, whose annals in America hardly chronicle a distinguished name between William Dunlap and Clyde Fitch, now boasts Eugene O'Neill, a European celebrity. Philosophy, also, which, after Edwards, lay dormant in practical America until William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey, has now attained a vital if embattled life in the warfare aroused by Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, and Paul Elmer More. Yet the new humanism, even in this more cultivated America, remains a somewhat esoteric issue. We are less likely to enter these decorous chambers than to pick up in a club and bookstall the brilliant critics H. L. Mencken and G. J. Nathan, who wage the old battle against our stupidity in witty flagellations, or Stuart P. Sherman, unfettered college professor, who analyzed our old besetting sins, but entreated us not to sever with noble traditions.

This book has told briefly the story of our literature, beginning with the little band of Puritans who looked wistfully after the receding *Mayflower*. At this moment (1933) the European civilization, to which the vessel returned in 1620, wears, after three centuries, a weary, defeated mien. If the cycles which

Spengler describes are laws, then the European world declines, and with it, perhaps, our own civilization, which is still closely bound to our old home. If we, too, are decaying, then both Europe and America can watch with understanding eyes the nationalism of a certain expanding island in the Orient. But if we are still upon the ascent, then it is faintly possible that the American civilization will in the future rival the glory of older peoples. For the story of our literature relates, in the main, the manumission of our national mind, and prophecies, in spite of present confusion, a civilization and an art which will be our own. This, at least, we know, that, however original, our literature will not be the knuckled giant envisaged by Whitman. It will be, like all great bodies of writing, one in a federated republic of literatures, as England's is one among the federated literatures of Europe. Now, in our most thoughtful writers may be found not only the frontier but also the wisdom of proven cultures. In fine, if we are fulfilling the injunction of, perhaps, the greatest American:

"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"

we remember, too, that he added:

"Patience,—patience; with the shades of all the good and great for company . . ."



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